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ON THE WATERFRONT:
AN ORAL HISTORY OF RICHMOND, CALIFORNIA

Harry and Marguerite Williams
REFLECTIONS OF A LONGTIME BLACK FAMILY IN RICHMOND

An Interview Conducted by
Judith K. Dunning
in 1985

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INTRODUCTION by Jim Quay

It is a great pleasure to introduce "On the Waterfront" to you. I myself was introduced to the project in September 1983, shortly after becoming executive director of the California Council for the Humanities. Both the Council and its mission of bringing the humanities to out-of-school adults were relatively new to me when Judith Dunning came to my office to talk about her proposal. Ms. Dunning wanted to document an important period in the life of the Richmond, California waterfront, but she didn't want to write a study for scholars. Instead, she proposed to interview most of the oldest surviving waterfront figures, collect historic photographs of the port and its workers, and to create from these an exhibit for the public. Would the Council be interested in supporting such a project?

Happily, the two dozen scholars and citizens who sat on the Council then were interested and, convinced of the project's importance, voted to fund Ms. Dunning's proposal in early 1984. Six years later, I now know what I couldn't have known then: that "On the Waterfront" had all the features of a typical public humanities project: a powerful subject, caring scholars, a resourceful and dedicated project director, and uncertain funding.

You can appreciate why even the best public humanities project--and "On the Waterfront" is one of the best--doesn't easily attract funding. In a state focused relentlessly on the future, the next quarterly statement, the next development, the value of such a project doesn't show up in a cost-benefit analysis. Who would care about the lives of Californians past? Who would care about a waterfront whose boomtime is passed?

The answer is: thousands of people, as Judith's project proved. First and foremost, Judith, who didn't just study Richmond, but moved to and lived in Richmond. Like so many project directors, she gave time and life to this project far beyond the amount budgeted. In the language of accounting this is called "in-kind contribution"; in the language of life it's called devotion. Those of us privileged to know Judith know that the project both exhausted her and enriched her, and she has won the admiration of those who supported her and the affection of those she has interviewed and worked with.

After Judith came a handful of interested scholars--historian Chuck Wollenberg, folklorist Archie Green, and oral historian Willa Baum--who gave their time and expertise to the project. Next, a handful of people at organizations like CCH, Chevron and Mechanics Bank, who thought enough of the idea to fund it. Finally, eventually, came the thousands of visitors to Richmond Festival by the Bay during 1985-87 and saw the photographs and read the excerpts from interviews and realized that they too cared about these people. And now, you, the reader of these interviews, have an opportunity to care.

In its fifteen years of supporting efforts to bring the humanities to the out-of-school public in California, the Council has seen two great themes emerge in the projects it funds: community and diversity. "On the Waterfront" embodies both. I think such projects are compelling to us because in our busy lives, we often encounter diversity more as a threat than as a blessing, and community more as an absence than a presence.

"On the Waterfront" gives us all a chance to experience the blessings of diversity. The life details that emerge from these pictures and voices make us appreciate how much the people of the Richmond waterfront are unlike us, how much attitudes, economies, and working conditions have changed. Yet because the portraits are so personal and intimate, we can also recognize the ways in which they are like us, in their struggles, their uncertainties, their pride, and their fates. What seemed like difference becomes part of a greater sense of who "we" are.

In the lives of waterfront people, we can also glimpse how a community grew and waned. Busy with our own lives, we often neglect the activities that knit communities together. Judith Dunning's project allows us to see what we are losing and how communities are created and destroyed. And so, "On the Waterfront" fulfills the oldest promise of the humanities: that in learning about others, we learn about ourselves. For the gift of these twenty-six lives, we can thank Judith Dunning.

Jim Quay
Executive Director
California Council for the Humanities

March 2, 1990
San Francisco, California

PREFACE

ORIGIN OF THE PROJECT

"On the Waterfront: An Oral History of Richmond, California," began in 1985. Interviews were conducted with twenty-six Bay Area residents including early Richmond families, World War II Kaiser Shipyard workers, cannery workers, fishermen, and whalers.

I was first attracted to this shoreline industrial town located sixteen miles northeast of San Francisco in 1982 while enrolled in a documentary photography class. For ten weeks I concentrated on the Richmond waterfront, often accompanying the crew of the freighter Komoku on its nightly run from Richmond to C & H Sugar in Crockett. It was then that I began to hear colorful stories of Richmond's waterfront and the City's World War II days.

The question which captivated me in 1982 and still does is--what happened to Richmond when World War II transformed this quiet working class town into a 24-hour-day industrial giant? With the entry of the Kaiser Shipyard, the number of employed industrial workers skyrocketed from 4,000 to 100,000. An unprecedented number of women entered the work force. The shipyards set speed and production records producing one-fifth of the nation's Liberty ships. By 1945 Richmond's shipyards had launched 727 ships.

There were other enormous changes. During the wartime boom, Richmond's population rose from 23,000 to 125,000. The ethnic composition of Richmond and the entire Bay Area changed dramatically with the influx of workers recruited from the South and Midwest. There was little time to provide the needed schools and community services. Housing shortages were critical. Twenty-four thousand units of war housing were built but they were soon filled to capacity. People were living in make-shift trailer camps along the roadsides and the all-night movie theaters were filled with sleeping shipyard workers.

James Leiby, professor of Social Welfare at UC Berkeley, called Richmond a "spectacular" case of urban development. What happened to other communities over a period of decades occurred in Richmond in a few years.

Some of the questions I wanted to explore in the interviews were--who were these newcomers to Richmond and were there reasons, beyond the promise of a job, which brought them in steady streams by trains, buses, and automobiles hauling make-shift trailers? And was this destination of Richmond, California, all that they had imagined?

Other questions were just as compelling. After the war ended and Kaiser and fifty-five other industries moved out of Richmond, leaving this new population suddenly unemployed, what made people stay? And for those who left Richmond and returned home to their families in the South and Midwest, what made them come back to Richmond a second time, often bringing relatives with them?

As intrigued as I was by this new population, I also wanted to know how Richmond natives experienced these changes. In a sense, as others moved in to find new homes in Richmond, the longtime residents were losing their once small and familiar home town.

Initially, I tried to locate people who were living and working in Richmond before the World War II boom. They worked in the canneries, at the Chevron Refinery, or made their living fishing in San Pablo Bay. Most of these first interviewees were California natives, born and raised in Richmond. But the majority of the interviewees for this project came from other places--Texas, Arkansas, Oklahoma, Missouri, Iowa, Idaho, Utah--all to start a new life in California. Each one had a story to tell. Armed with a tape recorder, a camera, and lots of unanswered questions, I set out to record these local residents.

INTERVIEW SETTING

With few exceptions, the initial interview took place at the narrator's home. Because I was recording a diverse group, the interview setting varied dramatically. One day I might be in a neighborhood where residents, fearing stray bullets, keep their curtains drawn and their lights dimmed. Another day I would be in a home with a sweeping view of the bay, built by a former cannery owner during the Depression.

When possible, I recorded additional interviews and photographed at locations where the narrators had lived or worked. Some of these included the former Filice and Perrelli Canning Company, Ferry Point, Point San Pablo Yacht Harbor, and the last remaining World War II shipyard structures...since torn down. I also spent many days off shore. When interviewing Dominic and Tony Ghio, fishermen for over sixty years, I accompanied them on dawn fishing trips in San Pablo Bay. However, following a turbulent twelve-hour whale watching excursion to the Farallon Islands with former whaler Pratt Peterson, I vowed to continue my research on land.

When I asked some project participants to give me a personalized tour of Richmond to see what landmarks were important to them, all too often I was shown vacant lots where a family home, church, or favorite cafe once stood. The downtown, once bustling with movie theaters, dance halls, and department stores, is eerily quiet for a city of 82,000. I found that local residents are still angry over the loss of their downtown district during the 1960s redevelopment era. Longtime residents spoke emotionally of the city losing its center. Hilltop Mall, built on the outskirts of town and accessible by automobile, was no substitute for a shopping district in the middle of town. The struggle to rebuild the downtown and to attract new businesses is an ongoing one for the City of Richmond.

After the interviewing was completed, there were photo sessions in the narrator's homes and former work places, as well as meetings in which we went through family albums and trunks. Some wonderful photographs and the stories behind them were uncovered during this process. Copies are included in the individual volumes.

PUBLIC USES OF THE ORAL HISTORIES

From the early stages of this project, both the text from the oral histories and the collection of photographs, have been used in community events. Examples include photo panels and maritime demonstrations at Richmond's Festival by the Bay, 1985, 1986, and 1987; and Oakland's Seafest '87. An exhibition, "Fishermen by Trade: On San Francisco Bay with the Ghio Brothers," produced in collaboration with the Richmond Museum in 1988, was developed from the oral history interviews with Dominic and Tony Ghio.

In an effort to present the oral histories to the public in a form which retained the language, the dialects, and the flavor of the original interviews, I wrote "Boomtown," a play about the transformation of Richmond during World War II. "Boomtown" was produced by San Francisco's Tale Spinners Theater and toured Bay Area senior centers, schools, and museums in 1989.

A new direction for the oral histories is in the field of adult literacy. Nearly fifty years after the recruitment of men and women from the rural South and Midwest to work in the Kaiser shipyards, some former shipyard workers and many of their descendants are enrolled in LEAP, Richmond's adult literacy program, where the students range in ages from 16 to 85 and are 70 percent black.

Our current goal is to make a shortened, large print version of the oral history transcripts for use by adult literacy students and tutors. We think that by using the true stories of local residents as literacy text, there will be an additional incentive for adults learning to read. The characters in the oral histories are often their neighbors, friends, and families speaking in their own words on such topics as the Dust Bowl, the World War II migration of defense workers, waterfront industries, family and community life.

THANKS

"On the Waterfront" project has had many diverse layers, including the University of California, the advisory committee, a wide range of financial supporters, and of primary importance, a large group of interviewees. I want to thank all of the project participants who donated their time, enthusiasm, and memories to this project.

Special thanks is due Jim Quay, Executive Director of the California Council for the Humanities, who has been a source of good advice and inspiration from the beginning. The Council's grant in 1984 got the project off the ground, kicking off the campaign for matching funds. Jim Quay's counsel last summer set in motion the completion of the oral histories by introducing me to the California State Library grant programs.

Bay Area historian Chuck Wollenberg and labor folklorist Archie Green have been my primary advisors, as well as mentors, from the early planning stages. Chuck provided insight into how Richmond's transition during World War II fit into the larger picture of California history. Archie Green reinforced my belief that as chroniclers of history we must continue to document the lives of working people.

From the preliminary research to the completed project, Kathleen Rupley, curator of the Richmond Museum, has been enormously supportive. Working in collaboration with Kathleen, and Museum staff Paula Hutton and Joan Connolly on the "Fishermen by Trade" exhibition was an invigorating experience as well as an excellent example of how two organizations pooled their talents and resources to create a popular community event.

Stanley Nystrom, a Museum volunteer and lifelong Richmond resident, has been a continuing resource to me. A local history buff, with a great sense of detail, he assisted me often.

Finally, I want to thank Adelia Lines and Emma Clarke of the Richmond Public Library, Sharon Pastori of the LEAP program, and Rhonda Rios Kravitz and Gary Strong of the California State Library for their support in making possible the completion of these oral history volumes and their distribution to several Bay Area public libraries which serve minority populations.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

In my work I am most interested in recording the stories of people who are undocumented in history and who are unlikely to leave written records behind. For me, the strength of this project has been seeing the transformation in how the interviewees view their relationship to history. They came a long way from our first contact when a typical response to my request for an interview was, "Why do you want to interview me?" or "What's important about my life?" And "Why Richmond?" With some encouragement, many became actively involved in the research and the collection of photographs, and began recommending others to be interviewed. "On the Waterfront: An Oral History of Richmond, California," became their project, with a life of its own.

This set of oral histories is by no means the whole story of Richmond. It is one piece of its history and one effort to generate community-based literature. I hope that it will encourage others to record the stories, the songs, and the traditions of our community members. They have a lot to teach us.

Judith K. Dunning
Project Director

February 23, 1990
Regional Oral History Office
Room 486 The Bancroft Library
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Berkeley, California

INTERVIEW HISTORIES

Harry and Marguerite Williams

Three interviews were recorded in April and May of 1985 with Harry and Marguerite Williams. The first was a joint session with Mr. and Mrs. Williams, and the second and third were with Mrs. Williams. All were conducted at the Williams' home on Third Street in Richmond.

Mr. Williams and I met in a curious manner. When I interviewed Stanley Nystrom, a lifelong Richmond resident, I asked if he knew any blacks who lived in Richmond before World War II. He mentioned a former schoolmate Harry Williams but told me, "I haven't seen him in forty years, and I have no idea how to reach him."

Some weeks later as I was conducting an onsite interview at Ferry Point with J.A. Vincent, we noticed a city workman putting up cyclone fencing by the dilapidated pier. Mr. Vincent, being a strong advocate for public access to the Bay, challenged the City's need for a fence. A polite but pointed discussion followed with the worker. Out of curiosity I returned to the site the next day and recognized the worker, who had returned by bicycle on his day off, to check the fence. We talked, and shortly after exchanging names, I realized that this was the Harry Williams whom Stanley Nystrom had told me about. When I asked if he remembered Stanley Nystrom, he gasped in surprise at a name he had not heard in years, then said, "Oh yes, that tall skinny kid..." Mr. Williams agreed to be interviewed.

When I called Mr. Williams to arrange a time, he told me firmly, "I don't want to answer any questions about politics, about the City, about anything controversial." As a city employee, close to retirement, he felt obliged to remain neutral. Considering his restrictions I asked if he still wanted to do the interview and without hesitation, he said, "Sure, I do."

As it turned out, Mr. Williams opened up on many issues. His wife Marguerite Williams joined us early in the session since she recalled the details of Harry's family history. She explained that her in-laws, who once lived with them, often told stories of their days in Texas. As a rule, I try to avoid interviewing couples together because they tend to interrupt each other and argue over details, but this was not a problem

with the Williams. Mrs. Williams was open and more outspoken than her husband. Whenever she started getting too animated about a subject, Mr. Williams would turn to me and say, "What's your next question?"

There was a lot of ground covered in the first hour and a half, and the pace was quick. We also laughed a lot, especially when Mr. Williams described his childhood pranks--when Richmond was all fields, he would catch garden snakes and drop them on his mother's doorstep, and young Harry was known for doing handstands on telephone poles. The ice was broken further when the word "peckerwood" came up and I asked for the meaning and origin of the word. After hesitation on their part and persistence on mine, they told me, "Oh, it's a derogatory term, like "redneck," or someone might call you "honky" or "white bread."

Some of the highlights of the first interview include a discussion of the racial climate in Richmond before World II. According to Mr. Williams, blacks, whites, Mexicans, Italians, and Portuguese got along fairly well before the huge influx of shipyard workers in the 1940s. Mr. Williams said that he did not realize that he was different from his classmates until he was fourteen and was excluded from social activities by his white friends. He begged his father to move to Berkeley to be closer to other blacks. The family moved, but Harry Williams continued to attend Richmond High School.

I think some of the most important issues talked about in the first session were the Williams' strong feelings about the influx of Southern blacks to the Bay Area. They felt that they had nothing in common with these "rural" people. According to Mrs. Williams, with the increase in the black population came more discrimination.

Their neighborhood on Third Street is predominantly black today, but when they moved there in 1947, there were mostly white and Mexican families. Today, like many urban areas, drugs and break-ins are a fact of life. At the start of the interview, Mr. Williams, fearing stray bullets, drew the shades and said, "I never sit by an open window." We sat in an unlit room. It was almost dark when Mr. Williams asked if I needed some light. Automatically, I jumped up and turned on the pole lamp next to me. At the same moment, Mr. Williams walked to the window and drew the curtains even closer.

The interview ended about 9 o'clock and I called a cab. Mrs. Williams waited on the the porch until I was in the cab

and waved me goodnight. A young man and his daughter picked me up. The driver was chanting and there was a sweet smell of incense in the cab. I struck up a conversation with the little girl of nine who told me that she accompanies her father almost every night.

As we were driving through Point Richmond, up the winding hills, she said, "Not too many people get killed here, do they?" Thinking I'd misunderstood her, I asked her to repeat it and she said, "People in the Point get along together. They don't kill each other."

I had them drop me off at the top of the hill and gave them directions out of the maze-like streets. But they lingered there awhile, at that high point in Richmond where you look ahead to take in a sweeping view of San Francisco Bay, Mount Tamalpais, and the Golden Gate Bridge. When you turn your head, the Chevron Refinery and hundreds of oil tanks and smoke stacks fill your vision.

Interviews with Marguerite Williams

The interviews which followed in the next month with Mrs. Williams were fast-paced. I barely talked because she had a story in her mind and was ready to tell it. She went back to her great-great-grandmother's days as a slave, telling of a community of freed slaves that her great-grandmother founded in Louisiana. Then there was a tale of her mother's flight to California with a one-year-old baby to join her husband who had been smuggled out of the South months earlier. He had been charged with fighting a white foreman in a lumber camp. At the time lynching was a fact of life in the South so he escaped one night and ended up in a lumber camp near Mt. Shasta.

Mrs. Williams, born in Stockton, was the daughter from her mother's second marriage. She spent most of her childhood in Stockton and moved to Oakland at the age of fourteen. Some of Mrs. Williams' most poignant stories are of the Depression era when she recalls the arrival of the Dust Bowl migrants in the Valley. She remembered a childhood activity of standing by the side of the road in Stockton and counting the out-of-state license plates. One year there appeared a steady stream of the oddest assortment of vehicles--beat up trucks hauling trailers and automobiles with their roofs cut away and filled with a family's worldly possessions.

She spoke of the Okie children being treated as outcasts at school and being told to go back to where they came from. Mrs. Williams developed a compassion for those living on the outside from an early age.

In a surprising comment at the close of the interview, Mrs. Williams told me that she is glad that more affluent people are moving to Richmond. She sees the newcomers as a vocal group who may bring about positive changes in terms of protecting the waterfront from more industry. She revealed that she is tired of Richmond's blue-collar, industrial image.

Judith K. Dunning
Project Director

February 1, 1990
Regional Oral History Office
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Family_Background:--Harry_Williams

[Interview 1: 30 April 1985]##

Dunning: What is your full name?

H. Williams: Harry Wheaton Williams, Sr.

Dunning: What is the origin of that name? Is Wheaton a family name?

H. Williams: That's my godfather. His name was Wheaton.

Dunning: When were you born?

H. Williams: April the 7th, 1920.

Dunning: Where were you born?

H. Williams: San Francisco, California.

Dunning: What about your parents? Where did they come from?

H. Williams: My mother, I think, could be Paris, Texas, and my dad was from--
[tape interruption]

Dunning: Upon consultation from your wife, we find that your father was born in Braserville, Texas.

H. Williams: Yes.

Dunning: Did your parents ever talk to you about where they were from or what their childhood was like?

This symbol indicates that a tape or segment of a tape has begun or ended.

H. Williams: No.

Dunning: No stories?

H. Williams: That's a funny thing. They never did talk much about where they were from.

Dunning: Do you know what brought them to the Bay Area originally?

H. Williams: My father was a porter on the railroad. I guess that's how he came out this way--working the railroads. Isn't that right? [calls to wife]. Honey!

M. Williams: Shall I answer? [in distance].

H. Williams: I have to refer to her, because she's got an excellent memory on some things. Wasn't my dad a porter on the railroad when he came out here?

M. Williams: He wasn't a porter at that time. He was a red cap working at the depot in Oakland.

1906 San Francisco Earthquake

Dunning: We have a new addition to the interview. Could you tell me your full name?

M. Williams: Marguerite Williams.

Dunning: You were telling the story of Harry Williams' father.

M. Williams: His father's name was Harry Hensley Williams. Like I said, he was born in Braserville, Texas. He came to California about 1900, because he was in San

M. Williams: Francisco at the time of the earthquake. His mother's sister, her name was Minnie Jones. She was living in San Francisco. She was a cook for a vaudeville team. Before she died, she talked with him.

Dunning: This would be--?

M. Williams: His aunt, his maternal aunt. She was the one that sent for Charmie Jones, his mother. Charmie was younger. She was a younger girl. She was living in New Orleans by herself. She was staying with some white people, working for a family. After Minnie got established in San Francisco, she sent for Charmie to come to California. They were in San Francisco at the time of the earthquake, the three of them, his father Harry, and his mother, Charmie Jones, and his aunt, Minnie Jones. They were all living in San Francisco.

The day after they had the earthquake, it just happened that Minnie had come on this side of the bay and got a domestic job. His father was on this side of the bay, so Charmie was in San Francisco by herself when they had the earthquake. They had to rent a boat to get her across the bay because there wasn't any other way. The ferry boats weren't running, so they put their money together, and they rented a boat to bring her over here, to get her out of the fire.

A lot of people on this side of the bay were renting boats and going over to San Francisco and getting people on this side of the bay. It wasn't official. They didn't have any official way to evacuate the people, but if you had anybody over there, you got a boat. That's what they were doing.

Dunning: Did they ever talk about the earthquake much?

H. Williams: No. They didn't.

Move to Richmond, 1927

Dunning: That seems to be the time that your family left San Francisco. Did most of them move over to the Bay Area after that?

M. Williams: No.

H. Williams: They left the city. I was seven years old when we moved over to Richmond.

Dunning: So that was 1927?

H. Williams: Yes. My father was a mechanic over in San Francisco. He used to commute back and forth on the ferry until he got laid off. That's when the Depression came. He lost his job in San Francisco. He scouted around Richmond. He wasn't able to get any work. Then they had the W.P.A. and all those relief organizations, which he worked on.

Dunning: Do you know what kind of projects he worked on?

H. Williams: Yes, I do. I remember the old tunnel in Point Richmond.

Dunning: Garrard Tunnel?

H. Williams: Yes. A lot of times they would plant him out there with a board to count cars going through the tunnel, back in those days, I guess to keep him busy. He had done that. Then they were building some buildings on Mare Island back in the thirties. He had a Model A Ford four-door sedan. A lot of fellows were on relief. Some of the projects were

H. Williams: up there. He would commute up to Mare Island, use old [Routel] 40, up around Selby, and cross, and go into Vallejo, and work at Mare Island. They were putting buildings up over there.

Losing Home During the Depression

Dunning: At that time, was your father living in Richmond?

H. Williams: Yes, he was. We lived over on the South Side of Richmond, on the same street. This is North Third. He lived over on South Third.

Dunning: He was out on Third Street, too?

H. Williams: I even know the house address: 342 South Third Street.

Dunning: You remember it well.

H. Williams: Oh, yes. I grew up in that house. We owed \$200 on that house and lost it during the Depression. That wasn't nothing. A lot of people, boy, when things went down, everybody bellied up. That was it. At that time, the Metropolitan Insurance Company had bought up all the mortgages on a lot of houses. When my father lost the house like that, they took the house.

Dunning: Where did you go afterwards?

H. Williams: I don't know just what happened, but we ended up in Berkeley, on Acton Street, where the San Pablo ballpark is. It's the second street parallel to Sacramento Street, going west. We lived at a house there. Nineteen twenty-seven Acton Street I think was the name of it.

Dunning: You rented there?

H. Williams: We rented the house, a furnished house. Walter A. Gordon lived next door to us. That doesn't ring a bell with you, does it?

Dunning: Yes, it does.

H. Williams: He was a lawyer and an ex-football player at the University of California. He had three children, and we were quite good friends then. He lived next door to us at that time. I was going to Richmond High, but I hadn't graduated yet, so I was commuting between there and Richmond High. My father had worked for the old Standard Radiator Company, over here by Tank Farm Hill.

The old Route 40, it goes up there. You remember the Rancho Drive-in? Well, right across the street was the Standard Radiator Company. He worked there.

Dunning: He would commute?

H. Williams: When he would go to work, why he would drop me off at Richmond High, and then pick me up in the evening and take me home until I graduated in 1939.

Description of Father: Harry Hensley Williams

Dunning: Let me backtrack a little bit. Could you tell me what your father was like? How would you describe him?

H. Williams: My dad?

Dunning: Yes.

H. Williams: He was a pretty stern guy. He was a Mason in the Masonic Lodge, most worshipful master. He helped form the first black Masonic Lodge in Richmond. There might be a lot of offshoots from there, but back in those days he helped form the first one in Richmond.

Dunning: That was a pretty significant position.

H. Williams: Most worshipful master, yes. He was a pretty stern guy. Even right after I got married and we had that one child, if he told me to do something, I did it. Right now. I was an adult then, but when he spoke, that was it. There was only two of us in the family; my sister and I.

Dunning: Were you the older or younger one?

H. Williams: My sister is two years older than I am. I recall one time when she was courting. She came in at twelve o'clock one night. He got up and he took a belt and spanked her for that. That's the type of fellow he was: very stern; very strict.

It kind of rubbed off on me, because I raised my children pretty much the same way. I enjoyed them, and I showed them a lot, and I took them everywhere, but it was still that sternness that came off on me, and it rubbed off on them.

Dunning: You were real strict.

H. Williams: Yes, I was.

Recollections of Mother: Charmie Jones Williams

Dunning: What about your mother? What was she like?

H. Williams: Pretty much the same way. She used to battle me quite a bit. You know, a young kid growing up, it's kind of hard for a woman to try to handle a young boy. I gave her all the problems and trouble that she ever dreamed of.

Dunning: Like what?

H. Williams: For instance, in the summertime, there was a lot of field mice, and garden snakes around. Back in those days there was a lot of fields around Richmond, so there was a lot of that activity going on out in the grass. I found a garden snake one time. It was about three feet long, like that. [gestures]. I guess it had swallowed a couple of field mice, and it was that big around. I killed it, and I brought it home.

I'll never forget that. I brought it home and I paraded around the neighborhood with the snake. I had these kids following me, and ha, ha, ha, everybody, you know. I was that type of guy. Whatever you could do, I could do better, even if it killed me. The kids around the neighborhood would follow me around. They got a big charge out of that.

I went up to my house and I knocked on the door. My mother opened the door and I said, "Look what I found." Whoah boy!

Dunning: Big trouble?

H. Williams: She let out a shriek and grabbed me and pulled me in. I dropped the snake, I guess, out on the porch somewhere. She took me in the kitchen and spanked me.

Dunning: How old were you at the time?

H. Williams: I guess I was about twelve years old. I did things like that. I used to climb up the telephone pole and do a handstand. It was a wonder I didn't get a shock over it. I wouldn't do it now. I wouldn't even think of doing it now. I would do things like that.

I took an awful lot of chances though. I guess somebody looked down and said, "We don't need him yet." That was some of my childhood mischievous things that I would get into.

Work For Filice and Perrelli Cannery, 1930s

Dunning: Did your mother work outside the home?

H. Williams: Yes. She worked for the old Filice and Perrelli Cannery.

Dunning: She did? I've been interviewing some people from the cannery.

H. Williams: She worked there back in the thirties.

Dunning: Do you remember anything that she used to say about the cannery? I know there weren't very many blacks working at the cannery at that time.

H. Williams: That's right. It was my mother, and Liddy, and--

M. Williams: Mrs. Freeman?

H. Williams: Mrs. Freeman worked there, right. There wasn't many. About three or four I guess, back then. Now I'm going back in the thirties. I never talked much to her about that, if any. I can only recall it because, as a kid, I wasn't much on communication on what type of work she did there.

H. Williams: I wasn't interested in that. The only thing I was interested in was the fruit cocktail and those cannery peaches that she brought home. That's as far as it went.

Dunning: She didn't talk about the job too much.

H. Williams: Not to me. She might discuss it with our father, but that didn't interest me very much.

Dunning: Do you know how many years she worked at the cannery?

H. Williams: I have no idea. Not very many.

M. Williams: Her husband got a job. Since he got to be working steady, he wanted her to be home with the children. It's like Harry said. They were very strict parents.

H. Williams: All this was taking place, I would say, roughly before '35. After that, which I had learned, the cannery didn't hire any blacks, did they, after '40, '41, did they? Did you ever work over there?
[Question to Mrs. Williams]

M. Williams: No.

H. Williams: I don't think they hired any blacks that I know of. If they did, they had menial work. They weren't working on the line. That's the cannery in Richmond. You take the Del Monte cannery in Emeryville. My mother-in-law, on my wife's sister's side, she put in thirty years there, down at the old Emeryville Del Monte cannery. But she's been dead three or four years now.

Dunning: It seemed like the Filice-Perrelli cannery was started by a closely-knit group of Italians, coming from the San Jose area.

H. Williams: I didn't know where they came from. That's a new one to me.

Dunning: A whole group of them relocated to Richmond together.

H. Williams: The Italians always had a strong hold in this area, period. They control the produce.

Early Industries Near Point Molate

Sardines, Whales, and Wine

Dunning: What about the sardine industry?

H. Williams: You mean around here?

Dunning: Yes.

H. Williams: There wasn't a sardine cannery here in Richmond. Not that I recall. There was the old whaling factory. Wait a minute.

Dunning: People have told me about the sardine canneries.

M. Williams: In Richmond?

Dunning: Yes. By Point San Pablo. If you get off at Point Molate, beyond the winery.

H. Williams: All right. It's possible, but I don't recall. I know as a kid, we used to ride our bicycles through Point Molate. That's before the navy took it over. The old winding road went over around by Winehaven, a winery, and went on out around to the whaling

H. Williams: station there. We used to fish over there and ride our bikes as kids out there. It could be sardines. I can't recall that.

Dunning: It was supposedly a pretty busy area.

H. Williams: That's before the whaling station got there. You're right.

Dunning: The whaling station didn't start until the fifties.

H. Williams: You're right. It was sardine out there. But as a kid, I didn't pay much attention to that part. I mean, the only time that I realized there was anything out there was when the whaling station started. I recall that now because I have patrol out there. In fact, I have to check that place out every Monday.

Red Rock Warehouse

Dunning: Red Rock Warehouse?

H. Williams: I have the keys to it. I just came out of it Monday morning. We have a lot of vandalism in there and my helper and I are forever going in there and nailing the place up. It's dilapidated, and if you cough real hard, it's about ready to collapse. The city doesn't want to stand liable. That's why I have to go out and check it all the time and nail it up or whatever. I've got it all posted, but it doesn't mean much to people.

Fong_Wong_Shrimp_Camp

- Dunning: I think we have an addition here. [Mrs. Williams signals to speak]
- M. Williams: Tell her about how the Chinese used to put the shrimp out there on Cutting Boulevard.
- H. Williams: Do you want to know about that?
- Dunning: Certainly. We'll be flexible.
- H. Williams: You're still taping it?
- Dunning: Yes.
- H. Williams: There used to be a Fong Wong shrimp camp. I'll start at the shrimp camp and I'll work up towards Cutting. Fong Wong shrimp camp was the name of it. Do you know where Lauritzen Channel is? It's right at the foot of Third Street. It's a little body of water that comes almost up to Cutting. That's Lauritzen Channel there. The Santa Fe Channel--that's that main channel in front of it--it goes right down to that Point San Pablo Yacht Club. That's the end of it. That main channel is the Santa Fe Channel. That little outlet that backs up there to almost Cutting at Third is called Lauritzen Channel.

The Fong Wong shrimp camp was right at the corner there, just prior before you go into Lauritzen Channel. The reason why I recall that, the Chinese had that area and they had two or three fishing boats. They were processing shrimp. They had these big vats. They would just take them all out in the back, to get their net or whatever, and

H. Williams: they poured them in these vats, and they're steaming vats. One Chinese fellow fell into that, fell in one.

I heard the sirens and everything as a kid, since I lived over here on Third Street which was only a block off of Cutting. We all ran down there, but they had pulled the old fellow out of the vat and took him off. Do you know where the Channel Lumber Company is?

Dunning: Yes.

H. Williams: This is before the Channel Lumber Company was there. That was nothing but a vast field where the Channel Lumber Company is, all that area was a field, all mud flats then. The Chinese would set out their trays with the shrimp right up to the sidewalk, clear down by that little Richmond Yacht Club. You know where that boat works is? Well, just this side of it. They had trays all out there with dried shrimps and all of that. No fence, no nothing. Back in those days, they didn't--

Dunning: What days are we talking about? About how old were you at that time?

H. Williams: I must be around nine or ten years old.

M. Williams: Fourteen. You lived over here when you were sixteen.

Dunning: It was in the thirties, around the 1930s?

H. Williams: Yes. They would lay these shrimps to dry just like you do to process prunes or apricots, something like that, right next to the sidewalk there. A lot of times I would go down and get some of those shrimps off it. You would just walk right over like that, like you were going to pick a paper up,

H. Williams: and I would get a bag of them. My mother would fix that shrimp with rice. You had to survive back in the thirties.

Dunning: Would you actually buy them, or just kind of sneak on over?

H. Williams: You know better than that. I pilfered them.

Dunning: That's a nice word for it.

H. Williams: Yes. I wasn't the only one. Everybody did it. You had to stay alive. You had to survive. We had a lot of not-to-be-sold stuff and everything. You know what I mean. If you're hungry, you're hungry. That's the way it was. Not only me, but all the white kids and Mexican kids, families that lived around that area, we all done that.

Dunning: The Chinese helped a lot of people get through the Depression?

H. Williams: Oh, yes. That way they did.

Dunning: Did they ever rebel against this feeling of "let it happen?"

H. Williams: No. I guess they understood. They weren't missing that much anyway. I don't know whether those were the rejects they ground up and put them in chicken feed or what. They dried the shrimp. They got good and hard. You had to soften them up in water, or whatever way they did it, and make a meal.

Dunning: Where would the Chinese be living?

H. Williams: That never occurred to me. They probably lived in around that camp there. I don't recall that much of it. Just down from that they had another fishing fleet with about three or four boats.

Memories of Classmates, A Multi-Ethnic Group

Dunning: I've heard that there was a fairly substantial Asian population in Richmond before the internment.

H. Williams: The only one I knew of back when I was going to junior high was a Japanese fellow. They had a florist business. You remember where old Grand Auto Supply used to be on Macdonald and--what was that?--Sixteenth? They had about a quarter of that block. His name was Tak Katayanaki. Don't ask me how to spell that.

Dunning: I will, but I'll wait until later.

H. Williams: The reason I remember him--he was a typical little guy--we were playing basketball at Roosevelt Junior High School. Something happened and him and I got in a fight. Of course, I was bigger than him back then.

I went after him, and I went to grab him. He grabbed me, and I guess most of them were just like us; we know how to box a little bit. I mean the average young black kid--I don't know about now--knows how to really get with it. I went after him, and he grabbed me by the hand and he put out his foot, and he tripped me and he slung me right across that gym floor, and it made kind of a whistling sound. Did you ever get a floor burn? They call it a strawberry because it burns all the top of your skin and it's pitted just like a strawberry. Do you know about that?

Dunning: Yes.

H. Williams: He gave that to me. That was that. I didn't want no more fights with him.

Dunning: He taught you something.

H. Williams: Yes, he taught me something. Every time I would see him he would stand off and grin at me. That's the only contact I had at that time, but I grew up with a lot of Mexican kids. A lot of them.

Dunning: I was going to ask you who lived in Richmond when you were growing up.

H. Williams: There was Mexican and Italian kids.

Dunning: Many Portuguese?

H. Williams: There were a few. Most of them came up from San Pablo. But there was a few around here. One that I knew, he didn't have a Portugese sounding name. His name was Chattleton. He was dark skinned, and he was pretty tall.

Dunning: What area were you in?

M. Williams: North Richmond. It was not primarily black, but in the thirties it was more Italian and Portuguese, Mexican. I lived in Oakland at that time. It was the time we came out to Richmond on hayrides with the church. This was the country. I tell you, they had farms out there.

Richmond's Early Black Population

H. Williams: I'd say in the entire Richmond itself there was about fifteen black families.

Dunning: According to any information I've gotten, there were only two hundred blacks total in Richmond before World War II.

H. Williams: Yes. That's possible. I can recall, where I lived on the South Side, there was me and my cousins, named Graves.

There was a big family of them. They lived a block from me. Then there was Irene Fraser. That was just in the area where I lived, South Third, between there and a street south of Ohio. Those were the black families that I knew. There were two black families that lived over by there--Lily Petgrave and the Ellisons.

M. Williams: Yes. South Twenty-Third.

H. Williams: Well, yes. South Twenty-Third, I guess you could call it that. That was south of Cutting Boulevard. That was before they built the freeway. That was an old dirt road that used to go up to Easter Hill. Easter Hill has been leveled off.

Dunning: During World War II, for the government housing.

H. Williams: Before they put that cross up there, Easter Hill used to be pretty high, and they had winding roads up there.

M. Williams: John Maynard? Where did he live at?

H. Williams: John Maynard lived down by the freeway down there by Potrero.

John Maynard, his father, and my cousin, named Sammy Graves, both of them were boilermakers and the only two black guys that worked for Santa Fe Railroad. Both of them were boilermakers there, back in the old days when they had the steam engine. Did you know that? [to his wife]

M. Williams: Yes.

Dunning: I've heard the name Ellisons as being an early black family. Are there many surviving people from that clan?

H. Williams: Yes. The Ellisons were here in Richmond. In fact, the Graves were here in Richmond before we came over. I think because they were my cousins could have been one of the reasons why my dad came over to Richmond to live. You want to know about the Ellisons?

Interaction with Southern Blacks

Dunning: Yes. I've been trying to track some of the early black residents, because it seems like the blacks that lived here before World War II would have a real different perspective than people that came from the South.

M. Williams: Yes, they did.

Dunning: Things really must have changed for you, too.

H. Williams: Like what?

Dunning: You were such a small group, and then suddenly with the recruitment in the South, there were lots of blacks in the area.

H. Williams: We still are. There's not much communication with me. Only a few of them. I don't consider myself better than them, but it's hard for me to relate, so I--

M. Williams: No communication.

H. Williams: I don't bother with them.

Dunning: Between the blacks that came from the South?

M. Williams: Like we've been living in this house since 1946. When we moved here, we were the second black family. We had another black family two doors down. Harry went to school with a Mexican family across the street.

Dunning: What was their name?

M. Williams: Morales, Pete Morales. He told them about this house, because we had, what, four kids, and my mother-in-law was living with us.

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[It was an evening interview and the room was getting quite dark.]

H. Williams: Do you want some light? I'll turn on some light there. We don't sit in front of an open window. [Fear of stray bullets] I don't.

M. Williams: Leave the shade open; it's nice.

H. Williams: Okay.

M. Williams: Anyway, other blacks started moving to the neighborhood, and most of them were rural people like from Arkansas, and maybe Texas and Louisiana, and there just isn't any communication. I know a lot of the women around here since, well, they started to come in the fifties. But there's nothing you can talk to them about, as a rule. I had one friend on the street who was here first. She's nice to talk to, but most of the people around, you know, they just--

Dunning: Why do you think there's such a huge difference? Is it because people came from farms, or is it their attitudes?

M. Williams: I think a lot of the people that came out here worked in the shipyards. They were more or less from the rural area. They were kind of country. My husband and I, we both read a lot, and have things in common like that. So many people, they don't have anything in common that you could talk to them about.

Like we talk current events all the time. I doubt that there's anybody around here that you could hardly talk current events with. They're not really interested. I don't want to stereotype. A couple of them you could talk about what's in the news, but like you said, there's no communication.

Longtime Black Families

H. Williams: Okay now. What else do you want? You wanted to hear about the Ellisons?

Dunning: Sure.

H. Williams: The Ellisons are an old family. They were here in Richmond before we moved over on this side. They're pretty well known. How many of them in the family were there--about eight, nine, ten, eleven?

M. Williams: I think at one time before they started dying off there was about eleven kids.

H. Williams: About eleven kids. One of them became a police officer in town.

M. Williams: The first black police officer.

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H. Williams: No. There was a guy by the name of Frank Williams. He was much older than Ellison. And Douglas [Ellison], he was on the force, I don't know for how long. Anyway, one of them became a police officer. He went as far as being a sergeant, and then he retired. He's around my age. He's still around. I see him every once in a while. They lived over on South Twenty-Third Street. That was one of the families of the Ellisons that lived over that way.

M. Williams: You know where they lived at? You know where Safeway Distribution is? There used to be, when I first came out here, there was a big mud flat. That was a tide basin. The old man had put himself right up in the middle of that, because these--

H. Williams: Right on the edge.

M. Williams: They said, since that would be so muddy when they got ready to go to school that they would have to wait until the tide went out, because that was a tide flat. That was a tide basin right there.

H. Williams: There was an old dirt road that ran down just behind their house there, and a big drainage that works around that way, and their house was right at the edge of that. Over on that mud flat there, especially after a light rain, I remember the guys with motorcycles, those that could afford it, would get out there and jump the ditch and daredevil around.

Dunning: Like dirt bikes?

H. Williams: Yes. They would do that on these old motorcycles.

M. Williams: But Douglas is still alive, and he has an older brother named King. He must be in his eighties now. He was a fighter wasn't he?

H. Williams: He was a heavyweight fighter.

Dunning: King Ellison?

M. Williams: Yes.

H. Williams: Yes. He was a fighter for a while. Then he gave it up. Douglas decided he was going to box. Douglas, and my cousin, and Bobby Garcia, they all used to box over at National Hall over on Mission Street.

Dunning: This was a pretty big thing. There were some boxers that came from Richmond, too.

H. Williams: Oh, yes.

M. Williams: Earl Turner.

H. Williams: We'll get to him. But those three used to box at National Hall. Each one of them won the diamond belt in their division; all but me. I tried it. I couldn't take it. But they went on and they won the diamond belt for being the champion in their division.

Boxer Earl Turner, the Earl of Richmond

H. Williams: The one that's well-known is Earl Turner. They used to call him the Earl of Richmond. Back in those days, he got to be pretty good. He fought a couple of main events at the Oakland Auditorium. He fought Henry Armstrong. I know you read about him in your books.

His downfall was when he fought Ray Robinson. Right after that fight he wasn't worth a dime. He

H. Williams: fought one fight on television down at L.A., at the forum, and he got knocked out. He was in bad shape. It took about ten, fifteen minutes to bring him around. Right after that, the California Boxing Commission revoked his license, and I never heard or saw him anymore.

Then one day I was washing my car off, and there's a guy pulling a wagon with a bunch of records on it down the middle of the street right in front of my house. By George, it was Earl Turner, and he was punchy; nose broke, he had scar tissue on both eyes, and he talked through his nose. I asked him where he was going and he said he was going to his mother's house over in North Richmond.

So I took the seat out of the car and I put all his stuff in there, and I took him over there. That's the last I heard about him until recently. The Oakland Tribune had a story about him. He came back to Oakland with Acie Turner, and I guess he's still living in a hotel or something down there. The Earl of Richmond they used to call him.

Dunning: Was he one of the more famous people?

H. Williams: Right. He was one of the more famous. He made pretty good money. He spent it the same way. He ended up with nothing.

M. Williams: What about Bobby Garcia's brother, Nino?

H. Williams: No, Nino didn't. Bobby boxed, but not Nino.

Dunning: Did you all go to school together?

H. Williams: Yes, we did.

Dunning: The Mexicans, and the Portuguese, and the Italians, and the blacks?

H. Williams: Yes. We had no problem; nothing; no problem.

Dunning: I'm interested to hear that because I've been trying to meet people who lived here before the war when Richmond was still small. The people I asked who are white, said, "Yes, everybody got along."

H. Williams: If we had a fight, it wasn't no racial fight.

Dunning: That's what people have said, but I wasn't really sure.

H. Williams: There wasn't no knives, guns or nothing like that. If the kids would fight, it would be hands and that would be the end of it.

Identity as a Black Teenager

M. Williams: When I first met Harry, he used to tell me about his best friend. All the time, "Mike. Mike Johnson. Mike Johnson."

I just assumed he was a black kid. Come to find out he was a white kid. They grew up together, and they were just like brothers. His mother and my mother-in-law, they were as close as sisters.

It was the same way in Oakland. I lived in West Oakland, and everybody mingled; Portuguese, Italians.

H. Williams: Yes. This will give you an example. As I was growing up here, I was about fourteen years old before I discovered I was black. That sounds funny to you doesn't it? That's the way it was, but as kids grow older and mature, and are looking for girlfriends or whatever, you know, and they begin to wean away, then it occurred to me; I'm not white.

It really floored me, because all my friends were white, and Mexican, and so forth. I used to bug my father, and my sister would too. I wanted to be around some black kids. My friends are gone.

That's one of the reasons why my father moved to Berkeley. He got so tired of hearing that, "I want to be up there where the other kids are," he just moved out of Richmond. That was the reason why he left, to give us the chance to be around our own.

I would say, "When are we going to move out?"

Dunning: You would say that to your father?

H. Williams: Oh, yes. Then on weekends, all the kids are gone, the white kids are gone, who in the hell am I going to play with, or whatever?

Dunning: Where would the white kids go on the weekends?

H. Williams: I don't know. I guess they went on vacations or something like that. My folks were never like the family that lived next door to us there, named Johnsons. They were white. I grew up with their boy. Him and I were around the same age. They were well-to-do. Her husband was a retired San Francisco policeman. Back in those days they wore the big derby-like hat, that outfit.

H. Williams: They were well-to-do, and they would take off on the summer vacation. We had one or two white kids that lived about three blocks away. The kids would play around with them.

They would ask them. They said "Earl, do you want to go with us up to Grass Valley?" Or something like that.

They never asked me. It used to break my heart all the time as a kid when they would take off, and when they would come back after three or four weeks, I was glad to see them. That was part of my life.

Dunning: How was the transition from Richmond to Berkeley?

H. Williams: After I got around some of the black kids of my own color or whatever, we got along good. I had a lot of fun there. We would go to dances. There at the San Pablo ball park, on Saturday afternoons, they would have jam sessions back in those days. Everybody dancing out on the court at the ball park. We would have a good time.

First Blacks to Swim at the Richmond Plunge

H. Williams: Going back to when I was going to junior high school, after I learned how to swim, I wanted to be on the swimming team.

Dunning: At which junior high school?

H. Williams: Roosevelt Junior High School. They changed the name. They call it Samuel Gompers now.

H. Williams: They said, "Sure." So every Thursday they would go down to the Richmond Plunge. [bell chimes] I knew before that that no blacks were allowed to go into that pool there. At that time, before my dad lost his house, he was buying his house, paying taxes and everything.

Dunning: We're talking about the 1930s at the plunge?

H. Williams: At the plunge. I knew before that because those kids used to go on a Saturday night, or whatever it was, and they would all go in the pool. Well, little Harry, he couldn't go. The black is not allowed in there. It never occurred to me then. But I made the swimming team, and I was going to go down on a Thursday afternoon to practice swimming there.

I started to go through the turnstile. I thought to myself, "Well, this is a chance. It's the school who's going. Our team might have a chance of going to the pool."

They had the turnstile there, and I got up to that. The lady tells me, "No. You can't go."

So I went and sat up in the bleachers while everybody worked out. That floored me too. When it was over with, I went back to school. I told my teacher about it, and he spoke to the principal. His name was R. Shallenberger.

I told him about it. He said, "Harry, next Thursday, you go down there, and you tell that lady I said to let you in. If she doesn't, why you tell me."

By George, I went back that following Thursday, and I told her. I said, "Mr.

H. Williams: Shallenberger said that I could go in and swim with the team in here."

She just opened the turnstile and I went. I was the first black to get in there.

Dunning: You were gutsy.

H. Williams: Yes. After I got in there, then I went and told my cousin. I told Douglas Ellison, and all the black kids I grew up with. We went on in there, and that's that. That stopped that.

Dunning: So you never had any trouble after that?

H. Williams: No. My folks knew about it, but they never did say anything.

M. Williams: I never understood that either, because we never had that when we were in Stockton.

H. Williams: You had the open air pool. Is that the one you mean?

M. Williams: That big municipal pool.

H. Williams: Yes, but that was open.

M. Williams: I know, but there wasn't any color restriction.

H. Williams: Yes. It doesn't matter, open or closed, it still wasn't right. My folks never said nothing about it, yet they knew. They never pursued it as to why.

Dunning: Do you feel like you were more rebellious than your parents were, or less accepting?

H. Williams: Oh yes! As time goes by, generations change. Sure. There's a lot of things that I would stop and think, or I wouldn't do.

These kids now-a-days say, "To Hell with it, boy. We're going to turn this thing out now."

I would have stopped and thought about, "Well, maybe we better not." They don't do that now-a-days. You see what they do now. They're out demonstrating and all that. [referring to anti-Apartheid demonstrations at UC Berkeley, April, 1985]. That takes a lot of guts in my opinion. I would stop and think, geez, all I would have to lose if I did that. These kids, they don't--you know what I mean--they're willing to sacrifice that.

That was my experience. Then I had names called when I was on the track team at Richmond High.

Dunning: You were living in Berkeley, but you would come back here to go to school?

H. Williams: Richmond High.

Dunning: Why was that? Why didn't you go to Berkeley High?

H. Williams: The time was short. It was too late in the semester to transfer. That was the reason. That's the only one I can think of.

M. Williams: Do you want to say that you all moved to Berkeley in '36? And you were sixteen. You had two more years to go, and you wanted to finish at Richmond High because all your friends were there.

He wanted to finish with his class.

H. Williams: Yes. I was the only black. When I went there, there was Earl Turner, Spellmer Blackman, and me.

Dunning: Out of a class of how many? How many people in your class?

H. Williams: You mean the regular classroom.

Dunning: I'm trying to get an idea of the graduating class. You mentioned that there were three blacks.

M. Williams: In the picture you have about sixty students.

H. Williams: Is that all?

M. Williams: Yes.

Stanley Nystrom, a Former Classmate

Dunning: Was Stan Nystrom in your class by any chance?

H. Williams: Stanley Nystrom, I know him. Where did you get that name from?

Dunning: It's a funny thing. I--

H. Williams: He was a tall, blonde kid.

Dunning: Well, he isn't--

H. Williams: He isn't now.

Dunning: He's still big. He's not too blonde.

H. Williams: You know where Nystrom School is?

Dunning: Yes.

- H. Williams: That was named after one of his relatives. They had a store right across the street from there, I believe. We used to go in there all the time.
- Dunning: His family came to Richmond before the turn of the century.
- H. Williams: Oh, Jesus. Where's he at now?
- Dunning: He lives on Clinton Street. I did an interview with him.
- H. Williams: Jesus Christ. If I ever met him I think we would both have heart attacks. He's around my age. Hell yes. I know him.
- Dunning: I asked him about any blacks that he remembered who lived before the war. You're one of the names that he mentioned.
- H. Williams: I know that.
- M. Williams: My goodness.
- Dunning: But he didn't know where you were. When I met you later by chance, I figured that it was fate that I interview you.
- H. Williams: It probably was. I would know him, hell yes.
- Dunning: He recommended I talk to you, but he had no idea where you were.
- H. Williams: What's he doing now?
- Dunning: He's retired now, but he worked out at Mare Island. He was an engineer for many years.

H. Williams: I was a shipfitter at Mare Island and I'm retired, but I went to work with the City of Richmond, because I have to do something.

Pre-World War II Era in Richmond

Transportation

H. Williams: Let's get on with about me, though.

Dunning: Okay. We were talking about the atmosphere in Richmond before World War II. Is there anything you would like to add to that? I'm trying to get an idea of what Richmond looked like.

H. Williams: Richmond the land area?

Dunning: Yes.

H. Williams: There used to be a streetcar that used to run down Ohio and make a left turn at Seventh Street, and go out Seventh as far as the overpass to North Richmond. You know where the overpass is, where the tracks go along there? You know where Seventh Street goes underneath? That was the end of the line of the streetcar.

I used to ride that as a kid. The Graves family that I was telling you about, they were very highly religious people, and that was where the church was. A lot of times on a Saturday night, I used to get on the streetcar with them. We would catch it down there on Ohio and ride it over there.

That's the only streetcar that I recall that ran in Richmond. There was one that ran down on

H. Williams: Macdonald too, but I don't recall that. I just recall the one that went running down Ohio.

First_Christian_Church

Dunning: One thing before I forget, I wanted to ask you about the churches, and how important was religion in your family life.

H. Williams: Religion in my family life was pretty important as a kid. I went to an all white church.

Dunning: What kind of church was that?

H. Williams: First Christian Church was the name of it. It was right down on Bissell Avenue. I went there. My sister went there. This one girl, or woman, her name was Irene Fraser, she went there. My cousins, that lived within a block from us, were--What faith were they in?

M. Williams: Sanctified. That was Liddy Graves?

H. Williams: Yes.

M. Williams: She's one of the followers of McGlothen Temple. It's a big church in North Richmond. His Aunt Liddy, she was one of the founders. It was a sanctified church. You know, the church of God and Christ, one of those.

H. Williams: My parents never did go to this First Christian Church. They would go to their church over there. I don't think my folks had anything to do with it, about what church we went to, as far as I can recall.

H. Williams: We went to that church, and took place in the Christmas pageant and everything. There were three black kids, young black kids, and they treated us fine. An all white church. There wasn't any problems there.

I went to vacation bible school. There was nothing else to do, so we would go there, and they would teach us woodwork and all of that. I used to go every year.

I think I've had enough church. Now, if I want church, I just turn on the T.V. When I get tired of it, I turn it off. That's as far as my religion went.

M. Williams: But your mother and father didn't go. That's what she's asking you.

H. Williams: No, my mother never went. I don't think she ever went. My dad, being a Mason, he went. I don't think he went in Richmond. He might have went to Richmond. He might have went to Berkeley or Oakland.

Father, a Member of the Masons

Dunning: What does it mean to be a Mason?

H. Williams: I don't know much about it. I didn't used to bug him all the time. I wanted to join the Masons, but he said, "When it's time. I don't think you're ready yet."

As far as I know, they were to help each other out, familywise. You know, a job, if it was possible. I know after he became a Mason it wasn't

H. Williams: long before he got a job. He worked for the Standard Radiator Works. He put in about eight years over there before he died.

Being a black Mason, they took care of each other; families and everything. The reason why that stayed on my mind was when my dad passed, they put on a funeral that you wouldn't believe. They had this young kid--he was a Mason--and they all came out with their top hats and the apron with all that on there. This young kid spoke over my dad, and he made one of the most beautiful speeches I ever heard in my entire life, from a church standpoint. I never heard a speech like that before.

That's about all I know about it. I know they're pretty close, and they help each other. I don't know whether they're recognized by the white Masons or not. The Masons usually have some kind of a signal where they can look at each other and recognize each other.

M. Williams: Lodges were very important in black life in the thirties.

H. Williams: They had the Eastern Star, too, which the black women could belong to.

M. Williams: Like my father, he was an Elk. When we lived in Stockton that was a very important thing to be.

Dunning: Would there be a separate black Elk Club?

H. Williams: Oh, yes. Heck yes.

M. Williams: Still is. It's still there.

H. Williams: Just like it is in Masons. I don't know. You don't know either, huh, whether the black Mason is recognized internationally by the white.

You know all your judges and all your muckamucks are Masons.

M. Williams: The whites, they did open the doors about twenty years ago to black Masons.

H. Williams: Truman was a Mason.

M. Williams: It's a social order too. They preferred to stay by themselves. As a rule, the blacks usually had their own organization, because it's social too; fraternal and social. My father was an Elk, and he was the most important person in the world. They made more of a big deal out of it, didn't they, than they do now?

H. Williams: That's about all I know about the Masons.

Dunning: Were there other organizations that were strictly black at that time? I'm talking before World War II.

H. Williams: That's the only one I knew of.

M. Williams: I thought they had the Elks and Masons.

H. Williams: They had the Elks, but not here. I'm talking about in this area that I know. The Masons are all I know of.

Dunning: What about entertainment before World War II? Were there many clubs, or--?

H. Williams: Well, the Masons would have a picnic, and they would have a dance, maybe, sometime on the weekend. They rented this hall right across from the old

H. Williams: fire department on Fifth Street. They would have a kind of a get together. They would have a picnic. The Masons would have it up there at Alvarado Park in Richmond.

Teenage Years in Richmond and Berkeley

Dunning: What about clubs? Music clubs, or--did they all come in after the war?

M. Williams: They had clubs in North Richmond.

H. Williams: You see, I was pretty young then. That's about all I know.

Dunning: I'm just trying to get an idea of what would you do for entertainment as a teenager.

H. Williams: Go to Berkeley and go to dances there with the kids. I don't know who sponsored it or whatever, but that's as far as it went.

M. Williams: Everybody from Richmond would go to Berkeley, and people from Oakland, they would go to Berkeley.

H. Williams: All week, I'll go down to the bay and look at the boats, watch them sail on the bay. That was the only entertainment that I knew of.

Dunning: As a teenager, did you have certain ambitions, or a vision of what your life might be like?

H. Williams: I had no idea. No.

Dunning: Do you remember thinking about the future?

H. Williams: You know, you're going back quite a few years. Jesus.

Dunning: I try to go back as far as people will remember.

H. Williams: Yes, but I--

M. Williams: He's forgotten now. When he was a teenager, he got this job working in a shoe repair store. That was his main goal at that time: to have his own shoe repair. He used to always tell me that. He was going to save up and buy his own shoe repair. He took that in manual arts. Shoe repair? Remember? And you got that job with Vito, and you got that job with Sterling. That was your main ambition, to have your own shoe repair.

H. Williams: It was?

M. Williams: You used to tell me that all time. Then you went to the shipyard and that ended that.

H. Williams: I ended up in the navy. That's about it. I think she's correct on that.

Population Changes Brought on by World War II

Dunning: Could you talk about when the real changes started right at World War II?

H. Williams: Changes like what?

Dunning: The population went from 23,000 to well over 100,000, and the whole ethnic composition changed.

M. Williams: You mean in Richmond?

Dunning: Yes.

M. Williams: He wasn't living here then.

H. Williams: I was living in Berkeley, wasn't it? Or Oakland?

M. Williams: Yes. We were married then.

H. Williams: Yes.

Dunning: But I would think even the change in population in the whole Bay Area would have affected the blacks, because you were a small population before that time, and suddenly it was a big number.

M. Williams: Oh, yes. It was terrible. Yes. I could tell you what it was like from my perspective, because like you said, we were living in Berkeley on Herzog, right up at Sixty-third Street.

H. Williams: Herzog runs into Alcatraz there.

M. Williams: Like Harry said, one day you look up, you might see maybe twenty or thirty blacks on the street, and then the next time you look up you see hundreds of blacks. Right after that we moved to Oakland in the housing project, right in the middle of when the war was really getting started good. There were so many that it was like aliens to us. Right? They would be in the parking lot. We would just watch them, because of their behavior and everything.

H. Williams: She remembers that more than I do, because I went in the service.

M. Williams: Not then.

H. Williams: No, but I was either working at Mare Island, or something like that. I don't recall all of that.

M. Williams: It was though. It was just like--

H. Williams: I met a lot of people in the Navy yard when I worked there. They were from all over, but I didn't have too much personal contact with them.

##

Racial Discrimination

Dunning: You were talking about the change in your own life during World War II.

M. Williams: You're not old enough to understand, but California was, like you said, a melting pot. We lived in West Oakland myself, my family, and it was all around us. We had Portuguese, black, Mexican, white. We all lived together in a little community. The kids would go across the street and play basketball together, and just like Harry was telling you, there wasn't any racial fights. Kids would fight, but there wasn't any racial fights.

It seemed like overnight people on the street would be fighting with knives and everything. It would be a lot of bad feeling. When we first came to Richmond in 1946, him and I and the kids, there was still a lot of that bad feeling, because you would go into the store downtown and the people wouldn't want to wait on you. That bothered me because I wasn't used to that. Then, like Harry said, most of them would be women from Arkansas, they have the jobs downtown. They really wouldn't want to wait on you.

I wasn't used to it, so I used to have to fight all the time. Not "fight," fight, but just

M. Williams: speak up and let them know that my money was as good as anybody else's. He would go to a gas station and they wouldn't want to give him any gas, and he would sit there and make them give him gas. Little things like that, just a little bit of bad feelings, really.

When we moved here, the neighborhood wasn't all that great, but almost as soon as we moved in, the people all up and down the street, they started putting for sale signs on their houses. There was a lot of bad feeling in Richmond. It was like that way for a long time.

He was telling you about this police officer named Douglas Ellison. He was a policeman here during the war. He used to tell us how if he would go to arrest a white person they would tell him he couldn't do it, even though he had a badge, so they would send a white officer with him to make the arrest.

That's how the feeling was here. They brought a lot of that with them from the South. I'm not talking about just the whites, I'm talking about the blacks too, because they would go around, a lot of them, with chips on their shoulders. There was a couple of neighbors around. They stayed; white people. The blacks started moving in, and they didn't want you to talk to the white people.

Derogatory Slang

Dunning: The blacks didn't want you to talk to them.

M. Williams: No. They called them peckerwoods and all that.

Dunning: Called them what?

M. Williams: [laughs].

Dunning: What was the word?

M. Williams: Peckerwoods. We had two white families right here in the other house. They were very nice. They had kids, and their kids and my kids were friendly.

Dunning: What is that word? I've never heard that word, and I'm interested in it.

M. Williams: A peckerood?

Dunning: Peckerwood. Is that what? P-E--

M. Williams: Pecker. Wood. Peckerwood. That's just slang that came out of the South, I guess.

H. Williams: She know more about that than I do.

M. Williams: You never heard that before in your life.

H. Williams: I've heard it, but I--

Dunning: What does it mean, though?

M. Williams: It's just like, you know, the white people have words back there for blacks.

Dunning: Yes, but I wonder what that specific word means.

M. Williams: It's just a derogatory term.

H. Williams: The same thing as the expression of "That redneck."

M. Williams: Yes. Redneck, and other words.

H. Williams: You've heard that name before. About the same thing.

M. Williams: Like crackers.

H. Williams: Cracker, or whatever.

M. Williams: Derogatory terms.

H. Williams: Like the blacks would be referring, like to you, a white, "patty." Now they use the word "Honky."

M. Williams: "Bread," "white bread." I hadn't even heard of that word before. I had never heard "redneck" and I had never heard "peckerwood" before. We lived in Stockton, like I said. We had all the people that came from Oklahoma. We used to hear the white people in Stockton, now, calling these people "Okies."

That was bad down there. You talk about bad racial feeling, you should have been in Stockton in the thirties. You wouldn't believe the way they treated those people.

Dunning: You mean the Dust Bowl migrants from Oklahoma--

M. Williams: They didn't even want them to attend the school. You would have thought they would have been prejudiced against us because we were black, and then they had a lot of Filipinos and Japanese. It was those people from Oklahoma. They did not want those kids to go to the schools.

The parents didn't want their kids to go to school with their kids. They were standing out there by the school and--

H. Williams: Who would be standing out there?

M. Williams: The white parents. Ask my sister, she'll tell you.

H. Williams: They were defying the white Okies?

M. Williams: They didn't want the white Okies.

H. Williams: Is that right?

M. Williams: They said they were dirty, and nasty, and filthy, and everything, and they didn't want them in their schools. Some of the kids didn't have many clothes. I guess somebody had to wash them out. They were just poor. They had been through a lot.

Those white people would sit out there, and they would curse at them, and they would throw rocks. They did not let them go to the schools. They were talking about that they weren't paying taxes, and there was no reason why the taxpayer should have to support them.

H. Williams: Okay. Now what else did you want to talk about?

Dunning: Since we're on this topic, I was going to ask you about the Okies in the Richmond area, because people did come from Oklahoma to work in the war industry, and--

H. Williams: In the war industry, I wasn't here.

M. Williams: Most of them were from Arkansas, the ones that came in. The Okies, most of them had already come here and they had settled down.

Dunning: But then I've heard that some people that came out earlier to California then moved into this area during the war. And there have been such stereotypes about Okies.

H. Williams: Was it Okies or Texans that were on the police force that they had a lot of trouble with?

M. Williams: That was Arkies. They were from Arkansas, and Texas. The ones they called the cowboys?

H. Williams: I guess. I don't know.

M. Williams: Most of the ones around here, though, for the white, you'll find out that the majority of them were from Arkansas, black and white. For the shipyards, they recruited them from Arkansas. I talked to my neighbors; they said they had come down there and they had posted posters all over town, and they would pay their way out there. It was mostly Arkansas.

Dunning: I heard that it was pretty disappointing for a lot of people when they got to Richmond, because there was no place for them to live.

M. Williams: And people took advantage of them, like his aunt. [laughs].

Restricted Covenant

H. Williams: Talking about real estate. I had just come out of the service, and I wanted to buy a house G.I. You know where Forty-seventh Street is? Stege Crossing there? You know where the park is? Right across the street were some houses. In fact, the house is still standing. Back then, it was a nice looking house all on one level there. What year was that?

M. Williams: It was 1946.

H. Williams: We saw the for sale sign on the house. I had this old '36 Chevrolet. I got out and asked the guy if the house was for sale and he said, "Yes."

They rented to a Stimson, I believe it was. He had an office on Solano and San Pablo. We went over there and told him we would like to buy the house.

H. Williams: He said, "Well, you have to put up a deposit." Three hundred dollars wasn't it? That was part of my mustering out pay, so I gave him three hundred dollars.

I went back to see about the house, and I found out they had what they called a restricted covenant. This house could not be sold to blacks, Orientals, Mexicans, or whatever.

I went back and told the guy, the realtor, and asked for my money back, and he said, "No. That's it."

I jumped in the car--she was with me--and I drove right to the V.A. in Oakland. I told the lawyer at the V.A. administration about it. He picked the phone up and he called back to the guy.

He came out and he said, "You can go pick up your money."

I went and got my money. He was going to take advantage of me, see. A little young black kid out of the service don't know nothing.

So I got my money back. All that time I was looking for a house, and I ran across Morales, Pete Morales. We grew up together. He was working in the Navy yard at Mare Island too.

He said, "I know a house across the street from mine." He showed me this one.

Dunning: This same house?

H. Williams: This same house. That's how I ended up here.

Housing Crisis:--1940s

M. Williams: I think you were asking about the people that came out here to work in the shipyards, about housing. Well, that's when they put up all this what they called temporary war housing. Richmond had housing projects you wouldn't believe. On Canal, all that was housing. They had public housing on South Forty-seventh and Hoffman Boulevard. All of it was housing.

H. Williams: You take those houses down there in Berkeley below San Pablo. They were there at that time, only Berkeley cleaned them up and they use it as permanent housing.

M. Williams: You mean University Village?

H. Williams: Yes.

M. Williams: It took them about a year to get the housing up. In the meantime, like you were saying, the people that came out here, they lived in trailers. His aunt lived in North Richmond, and she really took advantage of the people, because she used to raise chickens.

You remember that? She'll tell you what she did now, but she wouldn't have told you about it. She laughs about it now, but at the time, I thought it was wrong. They would whitewash the chicken houses and they were renting that out. They weren't the only ones.

H. Williams: At one time, a black person couldn't buy any property in Richmond. They farmed them out over in North Richmond.

Dunning: This was when?

- H. Williams: I would say right after the war ended. They didn't want to sell. This all used to be white in here. Before, nobody could afford it, but after the war started, you got all this flow and mixture of people that came in here.
- M. Williams: Property was tight.
- H. Williams: Black people that had money couldn't buy any house around here.
- M. Williams: No one could.
- H. Williams: There were a lot of restricted areas. I was a good example of, of that place there over near Stege Crossing, South Forty-seventh Street.
- Dunning: After the war, when you had money to buy a house it was difficult to find one.
- H. Williams: It was restricted. There were a lot of restricted areas. A lot of blacks had gone to North Richmond. That's because they were forced, in a way, to move over there.
- M. Williams: What it was primarily, was the fact that all these guys got out of the service at the same time, and they had their mustering pay, plus they had the G.I. loan, and there wasn't any houses, because it was wartime and they weren't building. Like you said, it wasn't so much that it was restricted covenant, as there wasn't any housing to buy.
- H. Williams: The only time things began to break, was when the federal government passed that law about fair housing.
- M. Williams: And they started building more houses.

H. Williams: The California real estate, at one time they had control of everything as far as a minority moving in certain areas. They nailed that one down. Until they broke that, why there were only certain areas that we could live.

Dunning: In Richmond, one of the few areas was North Richmond?

H. Williams: North Richmond is where they would farm them out. What they would do, a black guy would move into the neighborhood, and then the white realtor would come along and he would go next door to a white family and say, "A nigger has moved next door," or something like that. "You better sell your house." They call that block busting. They used that quite a bit, and that's the way it was converted in a way.

They had all kinds of sneaky, underhanded techniques that were really disgusting. The only time things really began to shape up was when they had the Watts riot. When they turned that out, things began to turn around.

M. Williams: It was way before then, because--

H. Williams: But I mean things improved a hell of a lot.

M. Williams: We came out here one time during the war, just riding out here. People were living in trailers right off down Macdonald. They had house trailers and were living in them because they didn't have any place to live.

Dunning: On Macdonald?

M. Williams: Yes.

H. Williams: I don't recall that, but I accept that.

- Dunning: I first heard about a trailer camp on San Pablo Avenue.
- M. Williams: These weren't trailer camps; these were trailers on vacant lots.
- H. Williams: Do you recall that when they were on Macdonald there.
- M. Williams: Yes. We came out here, remember? Pearl Harbor was 1941, and you and I came out here it must have been, when Harry [son] was a baby. We drove out here one Sunday. We went up and down the darned avenue because you wanted to show me out there where they were building the ship.
- H. Williams: I don't recall, but I'll believe you. I'll accept that.
- M. Williams: They had it in the keel. Remember Kaiser had that big ship in the keel and you took me out there?
- H. Williams: I've seen so many ships in my life I can't recall that.
- M. Williams: That's when they first started doing the ships. All up and down the darned avenue they had parked these trailers. That was all they could do. They had no place to stay, they had so many people that came in. They had like little hotels, and the hotels were overfilling.
- Dunning: There were boarding houses, separate for men and women.
- M. Williams: Yes. They had a lot of men, single men that came out here to work in the shipyards. It was boomtown all right though.

Return to Richmond, 1946

H. Williams: All right. Now what's the next one? We're moving right along, right?

Dunning: We're moving onto your bedtime, right? What was it like for you to come back to Richmond after the war ended? You had lived here before when you were a teenager when it was kind of quiet, and then you returned.

H. Williams: I thought it was pretty good. I grew up here. I figured my family grew up here. It was a good place for them. It wasn't bad at all for my kids, back in those days. None of them had ever got fingerprinted or nothing; no trouble with none of them. They're all graduated, like I told you. I have a girl in college. They all have good jobs.

I never had a problem with mine. Some people have. This bunch of crap you've got coming up now is just terrible. This only disgusts me now, living here, because of all this turmoil that's going around, dope running and all of that. We never had any of that before.

Drug Traffic in Richmond

Dunning: When did you see the drugs really coming into this city?

H. Williams: The only time I paid any attention to it was when they broke in my workshop. I got broken in, and then I noticed that around the area a lot of young kids ganged up on the corners. Down the corner from us there it has got so darned open that it

H. Williams: seemed like the police weren't able to stop any of it, you know. Even now there's a bunch of them down there now, I'll bet you. I haven't even looked out the window. That's when I really began to notice things happening.

Dunning: When was your workshop broken into?

H. Williams: It was about six months since I've been broken into.

Dunning: Oh. Only six months ago?

H. Williams: Yes. You see, I'm working. I'm in and out. She's here all the time. She sees everything going on. It was only then that I noticed, when it happened to me. Other than that, I went on--you know.

Dunning: Until it hit home.

H. Williams: Until it hit home, right. I had been hit. The lady next door had been knocked. The young couple across the street hadn't been in there three months and they broke in her car already. Who else got rolled over?

M. Williams: This has only been going on down here for about two years.

H. Williams: Down there on the corner?

M. Williams: Yes.

H. Williams: They can't seem to nail it down.

Dunning: You think it's really the drug traffic?

M. Williams: Oh, yes.

H. Williams: I think it is. I haven't seen any transaction, but you can put two and two together and figure there's something going on down there.

M. Williams: One of the guys around the corner, he's one of the drug dealers. He's a fence. The kids, they break into somebody's house and they steal a radio or whatever, [they] take it in, he buys it from them, gives them money. Then they go to the corner and buy dope.

H. Williams: I lost over \$100 worth of tools; my own. I work on my car. Being a mechanic, that's like somebody cutting off a finger. I'll never get over that. It just floored me, boy.

Richmond Police Force

M. Williams: The police have been wonderful. They do everything they can. They run them away and they come back again, but they've really been trying to clean them up.

Dunning: You seem to have a different attitude than most people about the police force.

M. Williams: You couldn't get along without the police.

H. Williams: What do you mean attitude? How?

Dunning: I mean there's certainly been an awful lot of complaints against the Richmond police force.

M. Williams: That was just a bunch that they had on the force. They got rid of them, though--they knew who they were. Like we were saying a few minutes ago, they had a little profile on some of them. Their roots

M. Williams: were in the South. They called them the cowboys because they said that they liked all that, like you look on T.V. and see all those wild sheriffs. It was all in their blood.

H. Williams: They liked to razz people. Is that what you mean?

M. Williams: They had a picture of what it was supposed to be like, and that's what they were doing. They were extra brutal.

H. Williams: The only incident I recall that I had with one, I used to have a big German shepherd. When I would come home from work I would take him over the hill or out to the bay running. That time, I think it was the basketball season in the fall, I used to take him out by the bay and I would turn him out, and I would sit in the car with my little transistor, listening to the radio.

It was at dusk, just beginning to get dark. This car pulls up behind me. I was in this old Chevy wagon I had for him. The lights were on me, and I just sat there. I looked around. Sitting in the car, and I locked my door, because I didn't know whether it was a holdup.

Pretty soon the guy got out, the cop, and he came over and said, "What are you doing?"

I said, "Well, I'm listening to the radio and running my dog there." I said, "Figured you could see that."

Then he said, "Do we want you?" He said to me.

"Want me for what?"

He said, "Let's see your driver's license." I showed him my license, and he called to see if he

H. Williams: could get anything on me. There was nothing on me. I knew that. But just the idea that--you know. We had a few words. He could have shot me right there if he had wanted. But he didn't.

I explained to him and laid it very plain that I came out here every day, and then I run my dog. I said, "Sometimes I go over by the hill there, and I run him there in the evenings. On weekends I do the same thing."

I told her about it. The following night, I went right out there again. This time I had a pencil and a piece of paper. I was going to take his badge number if he came at me again, which he didn't. He came out and made a circle around, that old Smokey [dog], running. As soon as he saw the car, he came back. That shepherd was like that; he would come back to check in. The cop just waved and cruised on by in his car and went off.

That weekend, one Saturday afternoon, I had my dog on the hill and the cop came out again. This time he put both hands off the wheel and then he went on by. That was that. That was the only time I had a run-in with the Richmond police. You could plainly see I was listening to the radio with that. That's that.

M. Williams: You've got a lot of criticism of the police?

Dunning: Not in this project, but there's been quite a bit of publicity regarding the recent lawsuits against the police.

H. Williams: You have some family, I imagine they get half boozed up and everything, they get pretty belligerent and wild. Then the cops have to go over and try to quiet them down. That's when trouble starts. A lot of the guys get a few drinks

H. Williams: in them and they get terrible. They're almost, like they say, "Give an Indian a drink and they want to set the house on fire," or something. Then to have a policeman seems to even get them more stirred up, and they start fighting, and fighting the cops.

M. Williams: I don't like to see them overreact, the police or anybody. That's what I think happened when they did the killing like that, it was overreacting. [refers to lawsuit]

H. Williams: You mean those guys they shot? Yes.

M. Williams: We do need police. I've seen situations out here on the corner. The police go to make an arrest, and it just looks like the grace of God that somebody doesn't get hurt, because they want to fight the cops.

H. Williams: They know that they try to edge him on to get him to do something so they can holler brutality or whatever.

M. Williams: I don't like that either.

H. Williams: What else do you want to ask about now?

Dunning: I think that it's probably time to wind down, since I promised you we'd finish by nine o'clock.

H. Williams: Have you got all that you want now?

Dunning: I want to relisten to this, and if there are a few more questions, I would like to talk to you at a later time.

M. Williams: You should talk to King and Anita. Anita has been around here for years and years.

H. Williams: I don't even know their address. Do you know where they live?

M. Williams: I know their house. I'll get the address from Tolita.

Dunning: That would be good.

M. Williams: Then King, he's an old-timer.

H. Williams: Why don't you call sometime and she'll have that information for you. They would be glad. This is an old original black family that she's talking about, that was here before we came over on this side. They're well known, too.

Dunning: That is a real important story.

M. Williams: King is getting pretty old now. He's up in his eighties, but he's still sharp.

Dunning: One other thing I'm doing with people is going out, and they give me their tour of Richmond, if there's like a particular area of importance to them. It may be on the waterfront with you. Sometimes we walk or sometimes we drive. I have the tape on, and they recall certain things about that area.

In fact, I've interviewed a couple of people inside the old cannery, the Filice-Perrelli cannery. When you saw me walking with J. A. Vincent I was interviewing him because he lived out on Ferry Point as a child.

H. Williams: I thought you two had come down to bug me about that pier. [refers to day when Judith Dunning, doing an onsite interview, met Mr. Williams, a city employee, repairing a fence at a fishing pier.]

Dunning: Not at all. We just happened to see you at the end, and Mr. Vincent was curious.

H. Williams: You know what he did, he made a call to the city about me and Dale being out there on that. My assistant director told me the following week when I went in. I was telling him about you people down there.

Dunning: Oh, no. I was doing an interview about his early childhood. That was an offshoot, J. A. said, "Let's see what they're doing here."

H. Williams: She came down there with the tape.

M. Williams: No, no. I meant the man that you were talking to.

Dunning: Yes. J. A. Vincent's father worked for the railroad, and they actually lived in a converted railroad car. It was near the pumphouse. His mother had a little garden. They were right on the water.

H. Williams: That's right. I remember. I know the place. It was one of these boxcars. They took the wheels off and they had set it right off the ground. I remember it was facing the bay.

I don't have to go around with you, but I can tell you about some of the areas that I recall. Do you know where Atchison Village is? That used to be a landing field.

But they were small two-winger planes. They would take off, and land, and fly over the old Santa Fe station, and land right there, right at Atchison Village, before they built those houses in there. Did Stanley Nystrom ever tell you about that?

Dunning: Stan took me on his tour. Everyone has a slightly different one. That's why, if you think of certain areas, we'll come back. We can even do it all together.

M. Williams: He'll take you all over Richmond.

H. Williams: A lot of the areas have changed.

Dunning: Particularly the waterfront.

M. Williams: Sugar wharf, where he almost got killed.

H. Williams: That's no more. We tore that pier down.

Dunning: Well, thank you.

##

Family_Background:--Marguerite_Williams

[Interview 2: 14 May 1985] ##

Dunning: What is your full name?

M. Williams: Now it's Marguerite Ann Williams, but my maiden name was Brussard. That was my stepfather's name.

Dunning: What is the origin of that name?

M. Williams: Brussard was my mother's husband. He was born in Louisiana. There was a whole bunch of Brussards from Louisiana. It's a very well known name up there. My own father's name was Guyton.

Dunning: What year were you born?

M. Williams: In 1924.

Dunning: Where?

M. Williams: Stockton, California.

Dunning: Do you know where your parents were born?

M. Williams: My mother was born in Texas and my father was born in Florida.

Dunning: How about your grandparents?

M. Williams: My mother's mother was born in Texas. Her father was born in Texas. I don't know too much about my father's parents. I know my grandmother, but I don't know where she was born. My grandfather was Dutch East Indian. We know that much.

He remembers his father. One time, my father said that my grandfather had a pigtail. He looked

M. Williams: like a Hindu. He was very much an Indian. He was a full-blooded Indian, East Indian. He talked broken English.

But he remembers well. He didn't say too much about his mother's parents. I don't know a thing about them at all.

Dunning: Did you get to know your grandparents at all?

M. Williams: I knew both of my grandmothers very well.

Dunning: Did they ever talk about what life was like when they were children?

M. Williams: Oh, yes.

Dunning: Are there any stories that stand out in your mind?

M. Williams: My great grandmother and grandfather, on my mother's side, were slaves, so I know all about that. I know their names. We have pictures of them. My mother's grandfather was named Simon Gregory. His wife was named Phyllis Gregory.

Her mother was named Phoebe. That would be way back from my generation. It would be my great grandparent's mother. She came to Texas during slavery. She got away; she was freed during slavery. She came to Texas, and she started a little community there of other people that were freed slaves in Texas. It was very interesting.

Dunning: Do you have any records of that?

M. Williams: One of my cousins has an album. He has copies of deeds and birth certificates, so it is documented.

Dunning: Where is that cousin?

M. Williams: He's still alive. They all live in Texas. Most of my mother's people are all in Texas. My mother came out to California in 1917, 1918. It was right around the time of the first World War, because her husband got a job up in McCloud, California, working lumber.

She came out here to join him. I told you before, my mother came out all the way by herself. She had to change trains about four times, and she was only about nineteen years old. She had one baby at the time.

Then after my mother had been out here a little while she had to go back to Texas because she was pregnant again and her mother wanted her to be with her, so she went back across Texas. She made the trip about four or five times. Back in those days, that was very unusual for a young woman, especially a young black woman. She said everybody was so nice to her, though, that race didn't even play a part in it.

Ancestors' Stories of Slavery

Dunning: Going back a little bit, we just touched momentarily on your great grandmother, who was a slave. Do you remember any stories that were told through your grandmother about that?

M. Williams: Oh, yes. She used to talk about the things that they had told her.

Dunning: Anything that you would like to document?

M. Williams: Well, they were just talking about what a hard time it was. She said that she didn't have a hard time as a slave, not really hard like my great grandfather had. He had a real hard time, because of being a man. He was saying how his slave owner wasn't named Gregory. She said he wouldn't even take his slave owner's name because he was so mean, so he took his wife's slave owner's name. That's how he came up with the name Gregory.

I don't know his slave owner's name, but he said he was so mean, my mother said, that he used to make it like a joke. He said that he was so mean that he would beat the women slaves himself. Most of the slave owners, they wouldn't beat the women slaves, but he would. He said after he beat them, when they started bleeding, that he would actually rub salt in the wounds. That's how cruel he was.

All of his memories of the man that owned him were real bad memories, that he was a very hard man. When they freed the slaves, at first the man wasn't even going to tell him that they were free. Then other people started coming through. That was in Georgia. He got freed in Georgia.

He said people were coming through there talking about, "The war's over. Everything's over. You're free."

The slave owner told them that that was a lie. He tried to keep them there anyway.

I remember a lot of stories about that part, but then, like I say, my great grandmother Phyllis, she lived in a nice home. She said people were nice to her. That's why he took her slave owner's name, because the man was so nice.

Dunning: What was that name?

M. Williams: Gregory. Dick Gregory. That's why, I said, they took that name.

Dunning: The slave owner that your great grandfather was with, when did he finally tell the slaves that they were free?

M. Williams: He didn't. They just left.

Dunning: They just left--

M. Williams: Yes, because everybody was leaving so they left too. My mother said for a long time my great grandfather was afraid. He was always afraid that they were going to come and get him. That's why they left the South and came to Texas. They were going to settle in Mississippi, because a lot of people had settled in Mississippi, but he said he was too afraid because that was too close to Georgia, and he wanted to get as far away from Georgia as he could. That's why he came all the way to Texas.

That's how he met Phyllis Gregory, my great grandmother, because her mother Phoebe had already come to Texas and she was living there. She was a young girl during slavery. My great grandfather Simon happened to come to Texas, and that's when he met Phyllis, in this little community in Texas.

Community of Freed Slaves

Dunning: Who was the person that started the little community of freed slaves you mentioned?

M. Williams: It would have been my great grandmother's mother. My grandmother was Claire, her mother was Phyllis, and her mother was Phoebe. What would that make it to me?

Dunning: So it was Phoebe?

M. Williams: Great great grandmother, yes.

Dunning: That's wonderful that you can go back that far.

M. Williams: All this is documented. They even have old, faded pictures of the church that she had the people build. My mother never met Phoebe because she died before my mother was born. But she heard of her. Everybody knew of her. She was like a legend in that town.

Dunning: Do you know how she happened to actually start this community?

M. Williams: Well, they were freed. Their master freed them. She had her child. I don't know what happened to her husband. Nobody ever said. They said that she had made her way to Texas, migrated to Texas, from wherever she was at. She set up a little community of other people that had been freed too. They had to have some kind of little base, so she was able to do it. I don't know how she did it, not way back then. That was a long time ago.

Family Farm in Woodville, Texas

Dunning: Do you know how they survived after that?

M. Williams: Farming. Even just recently, my mother got a check from one of her cousins because one of my great

M. Williams: grandmother Phyllis' children--he sharecropped--was able to buy the land from the man that owned it.

He owned hundreds of acres at one time, because land was cheap way back up there in the country. He developed the land.

That was where my mother grew up at. That was in Woodville, Texas. She grew up on his farm with her grandparents. They raised my mother. They lived on this farm, until finally after he died and then one of his sons gave it to his son. Then his son wanted to share it with all of them, so he sold the land and he gave her a check. I think it was just last year.

So the land is no longer in the family, but up until a few years ago all that land was still in the family. It goes way back. They sold it all, yes.

Dunning: Do you still have any relatives in Texas?

M. Williams: Oh, yes. They're trying to have a reunion this summer, but I don't know if we'll be able to go or not. Right now they're getting up a big book, the family history.

Dunning: Who's in charge of that?

M. Williams: The cousin I spoke of, his name is David. He's very old now, so he passed it on to one of his nephews. They're younger people. I don't know them. My mother said that she met them, but she doesn't know them that well. But they're all in the family, and they want to keep the whole line together.

M. Williams: The book is being looked at so much that it's beginning to get tattered. They want to find some way they can preserve it because it goes way back. I just think it's fascinating. Lots of people that you talk to don't know any further back than their grandparents.

Dunning: You go back so far you can lose track.

Paternal_Grandfather,_An_East_Indian_Seaman

M. Williams: On my father's side, I only knew that his father and his grandfather were East Indians.

Dunning: Do you have any idea how they came to the United States?

M. Williams: My father's father was a seaman. At that time, my father said they were living in Galveston. My grandmother--her name was Louise Glover--she was living in Galveston, Texas. She met this man then. My father had told me just little bits and pieces.

Grandmother_Louise_Glover,_a_Sporting_Woman

M. Williams: My grandmother, Louise Glover, was what they called a sporting woman. You know what that means? Have you heard that word before?

Dunning: I think I have. Could you elaborate just a little bit?

M. Williams: Okay. When I was a child growing up in Stockton, my grandmother had a boarding house in Stockton, not too far from where we lived. All the people that stayed with them were what they called sporting people. They don't work, but they had income, like gambling, or that type of thing. They had a lot of bootlegging.

My mother said that some of the women that used to hang around my grandmother were what they would call "loose women." In other words, prostitutes. But I don't think that my grandmother was. I think she might be more like a madam.

Anyway, this man was a seaman, and my grandmother met him. They were actually married. They did get married, because my father said when his grandfather came looking for his son, he spoke broken English and he had to bring another man with him to translate. He was very outdone because he didn't want his son to marry a black woman. He was very upset about that.

Dunning: I was going to ask you about that--

M. Williams: Oh, yes. He was very upset.

Dunning: Because that was certainly a mixed marriage.

M. Williams: Yes. East Indian, too. They're very proud people, and they like to keep the line. But he was nice to my father. My father said that he gave him some coins. He talked to him and told him he looked like his father. My father did. You could tell that my father had more in him than his black because of his hair and everything. He was a real pretty brown color. Then when my mother met him, she said he was such a handsome man, which he was.

M. Williams: They actually were married. It wasn't like just common law. Like I said, my great grandfather was very upset about it, so I know that they were married.

But that was how my great grandfather came; he came on the ship. My father said that he only remembered seeing his own father one or two times after that. My grandmother left Galveston and went somewhere else and picked up with another man.

My mother said she always hung around what they called sporting people. People that maybe are going to show business. They don't work legitimate jobs. I know, in Stockton, a lot of the people used to hang around her boarding house. My mother didn't want me to have too much to do with them, because she said that they weren't proper people for little girls to be around. You know about diamond rings and all that.

Dunning: Your grandmother married him, and how long did they stay together?

M. Williams: It couldn't have been very long, because my mother said that when she met my father, that my grandmother had been married about two times. Like I say, she was, without speaking ill of the dead, from what my mother told me--of course, my mother could have been prejudiced because they didn't get along, but she said that Louise Glover was kind of a high-lifer.

I know that at the time when I was a little girl that my grandmother had another husband. But he wasn't there. He kind of came and went. That was my stepgrandfather. I was supposed to call him my grandfather. I think his name was Bill, if I'm

M. Williams: not mistaken. I knew I didn't want to call him granddaddy, but I was supposed to call him granddaddy.

Mother's Move to California, ca. 1916

A Family's Flight From Texas

Dunning: It gets a little confusing. Tell me again how your family came out to California.

M. Williams: My mother?

Dunning: Was your mother the first one?

M. Williams: Yes.

Dunning: You just touched upon that a little bit. Do you know what inspired her to come out to California?

M. Williams: See, she married her husband John [Brussard]. That wasn't my father now. That was her first husband. When she was a young girl, she married him in Texas. He got in some kind of trouble with the law back there. You know about lynching? They were going to lynch him. His name was John Brussard. They said that they were going to lynch him.

His mother was very powerful in that little town. This was in a little bitty town in Louisiana right near the Texas border. It's big now, but at that time it was very small. A whole lot of the Brussards lived there, generations of Brussards. They were very fair, I have to tell you that, because if you had ever seen them you wouldn't believe that they were really black because they were very fair.

M. Williams: Anyway, his mother was able to get him out of Texas. She was a very powerful woman. It just happened that someone in the family knew about this job up in McCloud, where they needed men to cut wood, lumbermen. They had a lot of black guys come from Texas to California to cut wood, because they had a lot of lumbering going on in Louisiana.

So they got him out of Texas, Louisiana, it was right on the border. They got him out here to California. He hadn't been out here too long that he sent for my mother. They had gotten married. They hadn't been married very long. The baby was young. He wanted his son to be with him. That was my oldest brother.

Dunning: Do you know about what year this was?

M. Williams: Yes. I was born in 1924, and he was nine years older than me, so he was born in 1915. So that was about 1916, because my brother was just a little boy about a year old.

My grandmother didn't want her to come because she was fearful--you know, my mother was very young.

Dunning: We've established that your mother was approximately nineteen when she came out to California. You were also telling me about the trouble that your mother's first husband was in. What was he accused of in Texas?

M. Williams: They said that he had assaulted a white man in the lumber camp, one of the bosses. They were out to get him, and word got out that they were going to come that night and get him. Different people hid him out all that day. They were looking for him.

M. Williams: His mother, she got very upset. Her name was Kate, Kate Brussard. She got very upset, so she got the people in the town to put their money together, and they smuggled him out here to California. I don't know how they did it, but she said that they were able to smuggle him out of Texas.

It was right on the border, actually, Texas-Louisiana. He actually lived in Louisiana, but he worked in Texas. That's how my mother met him because it wasn't too far from where my mother was at. They came to my mother and they told her that they had to get John out of town, that she probably wouldn't see him for a long time.

He had been gone a little while and got established out here in McCloud, up by Mt. Shasta. It was near McCloud, Weed, and Dunsmuir. He got a job up there. Then he got lonesome for my mother and their little boy. She didn't really want to go and leave her mother, especially with the young child. California and Texas was a long ways in those days.

She said that the determining factor that made up her mind was that one of the men came and told her that there was rumor around that they were going to come and get the little boy to revenge this other man, to show all the people around their lesson.

Everybody was upset. Why did they want to take it out on a little year old boy? He can't help what his father might have done or was supposed to have done. The man wasn't dead. It was just the idea that you did not assault a white man. Excuse the expression, but it wasn't done. Everybody was outdone about it, but then they said it probably never would happen. In those days people were real scared.

M. Williams: It was enough of a threat for my mother, and anyway, like she said, she was lonesome for him too. She went on ahead.

Dunning: She took the baby?

M. Williams: Yes. What she had to do, she said it was so complicated because they lived way out in the woods. They had to get somebody to take them to the nearest town--I think it was Orange, Texas--and she got a bus in Orange that took them over to another big city where the train came. There was hundreds of miles just from her home to the train station.

Dunning: Did she have to do this in secrecy? Was anyone following her?

M. Williams: No, but they kept it hush-hush, because there was always a fear that there might have really been a legitimate threat, so that she really was frightened. Now that she looked back on it, she said that they would have hurt my brother, but she said there was always a possibility because some of the people were mean. They lived up in the back woods. They were real country people, back in them little back woods. She said it was possible they might have tried to avenge that man by coming and getting my little brother.

Dunning: She didn't want to take that chance?

M. Williams: Yes. And like she said, she was lonesome for her husband, and then there was the adventure. She was telling me, the night before she was supposed to leave, everybody in the area came and they had a big prayer meeting for her. People pitched in money for her to live on and people brought in food for the baby and for herself.

M. Williams: One of the people from the church drove her all this way down to catch the bus. One of those ladies went with her on the bus all the way to where she had to catch the train to make sure that she made the trip all right. She was very frightened because of it being the first time she had been more than about thirty or forty miles from home. It was really quite an adventure.

I told her, I said, "Mom, you should write that down."

Dunning: Did she ever?

M. Williams: No. She told us about it. I always say I'm going to take a tape recorder and get it on tape. But mind you though, this is way back in the early 1900s. It really was an experience. She said the people on the train were so nice to her. It was a Jim Crow train. She had to sit in an all-black section until they got to San Antonio.

Then they had to change trains, so she was looking for the black train. The man told her, "We don't do that here. You ride anywhere you want." So then she got on.

Dunning: That was probably her first experience of that kind.

M. Williams: Yes, because that was just a way of life, being segregated. She got on the train--it was mostly white people by that time, and a few Mexicans. They all came over to admire the baby, and they wanted to help her with the baby. She just couldn't believe it. She said everybody was so nice.

Then she had to change trains again, in New Mexico, to another train coming to California. She said on that train they had a whole lot of men that

M. Williams: were coming out to California to work in the lumber mills.

My mother said that when they asked her, "Where you going, young lady?" she told them that her husband worked in a lumber mill.

From then on, she said, it was just like a piece of cake. Everybody took the baby and they brought her food. They used to go through the train selling soda waters. They just treated her like a princess. She said it was just as well, because when they got way up by the Oregon border, they had what they call a little jitney train. She said it was small like a street car. They had to go through the mountains to come around the mountains to take them up to Dunsmuir.

I know about what she's talking about, because when I go to Oregon I have to go pretty much the same route. It goes around the mountains. She said it was kind of scary because it was going downhill.

Then she was in McCloud with her husband, and it was no time at all before she got pregnant. When it came time for her to have my sister, she said she was kind of frightened, so her husband gave her the money to go back to be with her mother to have the baby back in Texas. She said she stayed back there almost six months.

Then he wanted her back again so he sent for her and the two children. So she had to make the same trip, this time with two babies. Then she had another one.

Dunning: When she got back to California?

M. Williams: The other one was born up there in McCloud. Then she had to go back because her mother was real sick. She had to go back to Texas with three babies. She said that was the last time, when they were young like that, that she had to make that trip.

John Brussard's Mental Illness in a McCloud
Lumbercamp

M. Williams: Right after my mother had the third baby, then her husband started acting strange. He would work out there in the woods and he would come in maybe on weekends. A lot of men working out in the wilderness couldn't handle that, being away from women and their family.

He started acting strange, and they kept telling her that maybe she should see about John, take him to the doctor, because he was acting strange. He would just go off in fits. She didn't think too much about that because there wasn't that much that she could do, except she would talk to him and ask him was everything all right, and did he want to go somewhere else and get a job. Maybe he didn't like being up there because it was such a hard life, way up there in the mountains.

Dunning: Was it mostly blacks working in the lumbercamps?

M. Williams: No, no. Up until not too long ago my mother used to still write some of her best friends from there. Like they had some Italian people, and they had white, and a few blacks. Blacks were really the minority. It was more like they had Indians and all different [races].

M. Williams: You hear stories of lumberjacks. Most of them were single men. But he had to have his family around him because he came from a big family. She said that my little sister was real young, and my mother was pregnant again, so that's when they--

Dunning: Number four?

M. Williams: Yes. That's when they told her that finally he got so bad that he had went out in the woods one day and he went berserk. The man that ran the lumber mill, he came in town and got in touch with her and told her that she was definitely going to have to do something about John because he was a danger to himself plus the other men, because they're out there working with axes.

She finally convinced him that maybe he should go see the doctor because he wasn't acting right. He didn't want to do it, of course, so finally they had to actually come and get him and restrain him because he wouldn't go to the doctor. Like they said, he was a menace, and they didn't want him out there.

Hospitalization in Stockton

M. Williams: The lumber company liked him, he was a nice person, but when a person goes berserk out in the woods, he could hurt somebody. There was even one of the men that said that John used to look at him funny, and he was afraid that John was going to come after him with the ax.

Anyway, they restrained him and they got him down to--I think she said that first they took him to Sacramento, because that was the nearest big

M. Williams: city. They examined him there, and they said that he was really in a bad state mentally. They recommended that they take him down to Stockton where they had a mental hospital.

When they got him to Stockton, that was it. They wouldn't let him go. They said he was too far gone. They talked to her and they said that he had dementia praecox. I think I pronounced that right. The reason why they explained that to her, because they said that she should be very careful with her children because sometimes you can inherit that.

Dunning: Is there a modern word for that? Is that like schizophrenia?

M. Williams: Dementia? I don't know. I looked it up one time. That's how come it stayed in my mind, because one of my husband's relatives had the same thing. That's what they called it. Like you say, now they probably have a more modern name for it, but at that time, even up until about thirty years ago, when my husband's aunt was staying with us, they said she had pretty much the same thing.

Everybody was afraid to say anything to her because she would just blow her top. She could be a danger, a menace. They used to always laugh about her and make jokes about her, but everybody was afraid of her.

That's what they told my mother, that it's an inherited disease, so watch your children, that one of them doesn't come up with the same tendencies.

My brother, the one that she was pregnant with at that time, we had always known that Bobby, he was the type. Even when he was just a little kid, he was just like that. I didn't know this until

M. Williams: years later that they had told my mother that one of her children could inherit the same strain.

I know when Bobby was a kid we couldn't tease him or anything. One time my older brother was teasing him. He threw a butcher knife at him. Things like that. Now I can see that he probably inherited the tendencies.

Dunning: But he kept it under control?

M. Williams: Now he does. Yes. He's just like a big old pussycat. Nobody bothers him because he's just kind of easy-going. He has a very easy-going personality.

Dunning: He's never had to go into a mental hospital?

M. Williams: No. That's what I said. Probably him having the other kind of personality, where he can get along well with people, he probably has never been put in the position where he would have to lose his temper. He's gotten angry a lot of times, but he's never got to the point where he's had to be locked up.

Dunning: Now I see how your family got to Stockton. That was quite an unusual reason.

M. Williams: When my mother came to Stockton to put him in the mental hospital, she used to leave the kids in McCloud, thinking that he was going to do better. She kept the house in McCloud. She would travel down here and leave the kids up there with friends.

Finally they just told her, "Mrs. Brussard, there's no hope because he'll never leave here."

That's when she just went on ahead and sold what few belongings they had up there in McCloud

M. Williams: and she relocated in Stockton so she could be near him. It got to the point where he didn't even know her. She would go to visit him and he would look at her and want to know who she was. Then he would go into one of his rages, so--

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Dunning: Now we're talking about Stockton and you were saying that your mother didn't even see her husband around the period that he died.

M. Williams: They told her not to visit. She would go. He didn't know her, but yet her presence made him very angry. He would really go into a rage and try to hurt himself. They finally told her it was best that she didn't visit. Plus the fact that she was due to have the baby any minute.

Dunning: He died within a year or so?

M. Williams: No, he didn't die. He didn't die right then. She was pregnant, as I say, but after she had the baby he was still alive. John Brussard was alive up until almost just before I was born.

Marguerite Williams' Father, Charles Guyton

M. Williams: She met my father and one thing led to another. I don't even like to go into that, because she was a young woman. Even so, my father was nice to her. I was born in 1924. I think she said he died right after my brother was born. My brother was born in 1922, so he must have died around about 1923. She said she was pregnant with me when he died.

M. Williams: The people in the town, they thought that was terrible. A lot of them actually believed that I was John Brussard's child. She used to go over there, so a lot of people, they believed that I was his child, too, although I was darker than the rest of them. They were all fair, and then I was very dark. That wasn't easy, believe me.

For a long time I actually believed that he was my father, too. That's why I took his name, Brussard, because at that time she wasn't married to my father. When I was born, they had me born as a Brussard.

Dunning: How young were you when you knew who your father was? Your real father?

M. Williams: He used to tell me all the time that John Brussard wasn't my father. He said, "I'm your father."

I didn't believe him. I used to get angry. I said, "No, John Brussard was my father. You're not my father."

The other kids in the family, they used to call him Daddy Charles, except for my little brother. The others, they knew. The youngest one, Bobby, he never knew his father, so he called my father daddy. But the older kids, my two sisters and my brother, they called him Daddy Charles, because they knew their own father.

My brother Bobby and myself, we called him daddy because my mother told us to call him daddy, but we always thought that he wasn't our father. He used to always insist that I call him daddy. He would get very angry with me when I went to school, and up until when I was almost ten years old, I insisted on using the name Brussard. We used to fight about that all the time.

M. Williams: He told me, "You're a Guyton. You're a Guyton."

Finally my mother had to take me aside and tell me that John Brussard wasn't my father. She was able to convince me that Brussard was not my father.

Dunning: Was that difficult for you? -

M. Williams: Yes, it was, because it set me apart from the others. I was already set apart from them because I was darker than they were. They were all very fair.

Dunning: Would they tease you?

M. Williams: My family wouldn't, but the other kids in the town would. They wanted to know, "How come you're darker than them?" You know how kids can be cruel.

Dunning: Do you remember how you would respond?

M. Williams: Oh, I was very angered by it, hurt, very hurt. My whole childhood, for me, it's a bad dream, because that was one of the main things. I was so mixed up, because my father was upset because I would use the name Brussard, and that was the name on my birth certificate. When my mother signed me up for school, she had to change it, but they still called me Brussard.

It was very upsetting. I can see how you can really hurt a kid. Then, like I said, Stockton being a small town, they didn't have that many black people there. The ones that were there, everybody liked to gossip and all that.

One woman, even one time to my face, she called me a bastard. Right to my face she said

M. Williams: that, "Why, you're nothing but a bastard. That wasn't your father."

I didn't actually know what it meant, but the way that she said it I knew that it was something bad.

Dunning: It was derogatory.

M. Williams: Yes. Right. Later on, when I found out, there was always that shame. But my mother got married as soon as Brussard died. Her and my father got married, but just enough time had elapsed that a lot of people put two and two together and came up with four.

It doesn't bother me now. After all, I wasn't the first and I won't be the last. But during the childhood days it really was hard. Then, like I say, living in a small town and being in a family where everybody was fair, very fair, it was awfully hard. Like I had one brother. He was very fair and had almost green eyes. My oldest brother, he was very fair.

Description of Stockton, California, 1930s

Dunning: You keep saying Stockton was small. How small was it then?

M. Williams: It was very small then. Just roughly speaking--all I can do is compare it with Richmond. Richmond has, say, seventy thousand. I would say at that time Stockton probably had about five or six thousand people. It has grown now, because during

M. Williams: the war it grew. We went back after the war one time, and it had grown. But when we were there, I would say at the most it had about five thousand, six thousand people.

One reason was that it was the county seat. On the holidays and weekends people would come from all over to come to Stockton. It was bustling, but it was still a small town. It seemed big to us at the time, but now I look back and I know it was a very small town. I know they didn't have that many blacks there.

Dunning: Did the blacks live in one area?

M. Williams: Yes. That was another thing my mother did. Poor little thing, she didn't do it intentionally of course, but at that time, mostly all the blacks lived on the east side of town, East Stockton. She got a place down on the south side because it was near where my father was living. He lived down there because his mother had this house, like I said, a boarding house, and it was what they called on the south side of Stockton.

It was mostly all white people there. They had a few Filipinos because they had a big Filipino temple. Then we had a big Hindu temple, so there wasn't really prejudice because of the fact that they had these other races. You couldn't call it prejudice.

They were near the outskirts of town, so we had all these Japanese farms out there. It really wasn't prejudice, but it was just that, I think, they had about two black families. Everything else was, like I said, they had Hindus, Japanese, Chinese, and everything, but we were about the only two black families.

M. Williams: Later on they had a black family that moved where we were at, and they opened up a hog farm. The other black people put them down because they had a hog farm, of all things. Then they would put us down because of me. This other family, her husband was half Italian, a black woman. They used to put all those three families down.

I'm going to tell you the truth. They did. It's no figment of my imagination. My mother would even tell you the same thing.

The other family with the hog farm was named Williams and she had a whole lot of kids, and they lived on the outskirts. Whenever they came into town, the black kids of the other side of town would give them a hard time. They were kind of like, I guess you could say, ostracized.

Dunning: The black people on the other side of town would give you a hard time too?

M. Williams: That's what I'm saying! The white people were all right. It wasn't them, it was the black people. Really.

We got along good with the neighbors, it was just that the majority of the blacks in our town--I was figuring up one time--I would say our community had about thirty families. They were all kind of interrelated. Most of them lived over on the east side. They had their own little social doings, and here we were way over there on the south side. There were three families, and all three of the families had reason to be ostracized for one reason or the other by the other blacks.

Dunning: Did it have anything to do with jealousy of your being on that other side of town?

M. Williams: No. It was just that people were mean in those days. Small towns can be mean. I know they have songs about that, about little small town pettiness. They can be very petty, and they were very petty in Stockton.

It just happened that before we left Stockton, the war overseas had just begun to pick up and the Depression was beginning to lessen. People were getting all these different jobs, so they had a few more blacks moving to Stockton. A lot of them settled out on the south side where we were at. It was just beginning to break a little bit for us, socialwise, but then my mother, I don't know what happened, but she just got tired of it.

My older sister had left. She got a job up in Oakland. One of her father's people, one of his brothers, he lived in Oakland. They used to come down to Stockton all the time because they liked to come to the races at the county fair. That's how we kept in touch with them. One time when they came down, they asked my sister if she wanted to come back to Oakland with them to get a job, because she could only get little small jobs around Stockton. She could get a lot of work up in Oakland. They brought her back to Oakland and she got a job in Oakland.

Meanwhile, my oldest brother, he had left Stockton and he had come up to Oakland to get a job on the train, railroad, as a porter. He was a cook on the railroad. He wanted a job as porter, but he had to take one as a cook.

That just left me and my brother Bobby. My other sister had died, so there was just me and my brother Bobby. Meanwhile, my mother had had my brother when I was ten years old, so there was three of us that lived at home. She thought that

M. Williams: they could do better in Oakland too, so we just stored up a lot of our belongings, got on the train, and came to Oakland. That's how we came to Oakland. I was fourteen years old at the time.

Dunning: Did your father Charles Guyton also come to Oakland?

M. Williams: Yes.

Education in Stockton

Dunning: Before we get into the Oakland experience, could you tell me a little about your schooling in Stockton? When we spoke briefly last week, you had talked about the Okies coming into Stockton. Could you tell me about that on this tape also? First, you went to public school?

M. Williams: Yes. Everybody was nice, very nice. The teachers and everybody.

Dunning: It was integrated?

M. Williams: Oh, yes. I never had any bad experiences at all with school. The teachers were wonderful. I'm not bragging, but I was very good in school. I used to read a lot, and they said I was a very good student. I liked studying. I guess if you like it it's easy for you.

Dunning: Did you have a favorite subject?

M. Williams: Reading. Anything to do with reading, reading and writing. That was around about 1935. I know I was around twelve.

Influx_of_Okie_School_Children

M. Williams: It was bad enough because everybody was just getting over the worst part of the Depression. They had had these food programs where you could get free food. The Okies used to come.

The reason that I know about this, because where we lived at, we didn't live too far from Highway 99. You know Highway 99? It comes from Sacramento. That was a big thing in our lives, to go down to Highway 99 and watch the cars, and count out-of-state license plates. That was when we first noticed it, because we used to have to cross Highway 99 to go to school. They had a little underpass for us schoolkids.

We used to watch all the cars coming in--I mean, these cars, you wouldn't believe. You see pictures of "Okie cars," as they call them. You know like those Beverly Hillbillies, like they had that car, and they had taken the top off? They did things like that, but they didn't have money for a tarp.

Dunning: They would make it into like a trailer?

M. Williams: Yes. A truck. I can't laugh at it now, because it hurts, but at that time it was a joke. We would all be joking.

Dunning: You probably had never seen anything like that.

M. Williams: We hadn't. They had farmers around Stockton, and they had old ramshackle trucks, but these people would actually take a car and they had all their belongings in there just like you would a truck.

M. Williams: It was funny then, but I look on it now and it just hurts me, because of what those people went through. They would come, and we noticed more and more of that type of thing. Some of them, they had old beat-up trucks, and they just looked so poor. They had been through a lot.

Now I've read up on them. A lot of people, they waited until the last possible moment to leave their homes. By the time that they left, they didn't have anything--just the clothes on their backs.

They would come through Stockton. Some of them just kept on going through. They would go down to Bakersfield to get jobs in the fields. Some of them, they stopped in Stockton. The people got so they actually didn't want them, there was so many of them. They tried to get a little welfare and get a little help. At first, everybody was receptive to that, but more and more started coming. Then they wanted to close the door, and they couldn't, so they started being mean.

I would actually hear people out there telling them, "Go on back where you came from."

They would bring their kids to school to sign them up. The teachers would turn their back and talk about, "You better go somewhere else because we're too full." and, "We got too many of you here now."

The kids would throw rocks at the kids. I mean, it's white kids. Poor white people. Then, when they did go to school, the kids would make fun of them because of the way they dressed and the way they talked. It was just hell for those people.

M. Williams: At that time my father had a job with the Holt Construction Company laying pipe outside of Stockton, laying irrigation pipe. He said that some of the white guys came out there looking for work.

He said that the old-timers on the job would just almost curse them. "Get away from here. We don't need you. You go on back where you came from. We got enough of our own out here. We don't need you." Just talk to them like that. These were people from Oklahoma and the Dust Bowl, commonly called "Okies" and then later, "Arkies."

All the man was looking for was just a little work to help to feed his family. It was miserable. It really was. It was bad.

Dunning: They weren't treated as human beings.

M. Williams: They weren't. They treated them as less. Here we were, black, and at that school there was only maybe about five or six black kids at the most that I can remember. They treated us better than they did those kids.

I know one boy in particular. He was in one of my classes. He just broke down and cried. He hadn't had anything to eat, and he was coming to school, and he was watching somebody eat lunch, just happened to look at him. The boy started talking down to him, embarrassing him. He just sat down and cried.

I remember, as well as I'm sitting here, I stood up for that boy. I'll never forget that. I told the other kid, "Leave him alone. He's not bothering you. All he's doing is just sitting there." It really hurt me.

M. Williams: Then the teacher wanted to know what was going on. I told her, so she took the boy outside, and they took him to the nurse's office. The nurse asked him had he had anything to eat. He hadn't had anything to eat in about two or three days. They fixed him a lunch. After that I kind of kept an eye out on him. He wasn't bothering anybody. He just happened to glance over there.

I guess after all I had been through I could relate to him, what I had been through with the black kids. Like I said, a lot of them, they ostracized us. My sister and everybody too, because she was very fair, and they said that she thought that she was better than they were. And she was just as friendly as she could be.

My brother, the one that's right above me, Bobby, he got so that he couldn't even be around those black kids because they would want to beat him up because he was so fair. He was the fairest one of all. A lot of times people used to tell him that he could pass [for white]. But he didn't want to pass. He had a lot of white friends because that was all that would spend time with him. The black kids wouldn't.

Dunning: It certainly sounds like you had a lot to deal with as a young child.

M. Williams: Well, I did. I'm telling you.

Dunning: And you saw quite a bit also.

M. Williams: Yes, I did.

Differences Between Okies and Arkies

Dunning: Did the Okies ever fit in?

M. Williams: Not while we were there. I think during the wartime when more and more people came out. Except for, I was saying, there's a difference between Okies and Arkies. The Okies were the ones that I had met in Stockton. They had a couple of families that moved down there by us because we had a lot of empty lots. They would pull up in there and then maybe have like a little shanty town, so to speak, until the authorities got mad. Then they would try to find a house. They had a lot of them that lived down at our end of town, so I knew quite a few of them.

I never felt that they were what you would call down-home country people, as I did the Arkansas people. The Arkansas people came during the war. They worked in the shipyards. That's what I was telling you. The Okies, I never had any problem with them. They're country people, because a lot of them came from rural areas in Oklahoma. When the people came out from Arkansas, I could see the difference.

I know it got so that when we were living in Oakland and in Richmond, if you called a person from Oklahoma an Arkie, he would almost kill you, because that was kind of like putting him down.

Dunning: What does it mean to be an Arkie? Number one, Arkies can be white or black?

M. Williams: No. When I'm speaking, I'm speaking of white people.

M. Williams: They always used to call the white people Okies and Arkies. That was the term they used during the war years.

They would say, "That's an Okie and Arkie bar," and, "That's an Okie and Arkie neighborhood."

But it wasn't, because the people from Oklahoma, after the Arkies started coming out, and then the poor blacks from the rural South, they made the Okies look good. [laughs].

Dunning: The Okies actually gained status at that time?

M. Williams: Yes. But I'll tell you one thing. I'm not trying to stereotype a whole race of people, but those Okies, as they called them, when they came out here, they worked. I was telling you how people mistreated them. It just happened that these programs were beginning to open up then. They had to give them jobs because so many programs were opening up because of the N.R.A. [National Recovery Act], and then they were just beginning to have what they called a Lend-Lease.

Jobs Opening Up, Late 1930s

Dunning: What was that?

M. Williams: They called it Lend-Lease at that time. We were building armaments for England because England was beginning to have some kind of trouble overseas. They were getting ready to start fighting. They were being attacked.

Dunning: Oh. You're talking about right before World War II, like 1940?

M. Williams: No, this was right around 1937. That's when a lot of jobs opened up because our country was started doing a lot of manufacturing of armaments to send to England. We weren't in the war, remember? No, you read about that. It was before your time. But our country said that we couldn't get involved in the war physically--troops, etc.--but we would send in everything they needed.

The United States was manufacturing military equipment for our allies. Consequently, a lot of jobs opened up. A lot of people left to go down to Southern California to work in the factories. Then they started building airplanes, so more jobs opened up. It was kind of like a little boom.

Those Okie people, what I call the Okies, they started getting jobs. That's what my father used to get upset about. He said these people, they've been out here two years and they can go out and get a good job. He couldn't get anything because he was kind of old by that time. When my brother was born my father was in his fifties, so he was in his forties when I was born, so at that time he was almost sixty years old. That's why he couldn't get a job, due to the fact of his age.

But he thought it was because they were prejudiced against him, which they weren't. If they could get a younger guy, it didn't matter. A lot of the black people were getting jobs, and everybody wanted to know how come we wanted to leave Stockton, now that jobs were opening up. But my mother really wanted to get away because I think she kind of missed the kids. She liked to roam. I found that out about her.

Dunning: She was a traveler.

M. Williams: Yes, because she has moved quite a bit in her lifetime. We left Stockton around '36. I was fourteen.

Just like I say, jobs were beginning to open up, and a lot of the Okie people were buying homes and getting little farms. They were really making a success.

Dunning: Just in California, or--?

M. Williams: In Stockton. I'm talking about the Stockton area. I read not too long ago how a lot of them became assimilated in California. They did go down in the Valley, and they were able to sharecrop that land, and then they were able to buy it. I think they said at one time half the farmers in the Bakersfield and Fresno area, all of their roots are in Oklahoma, the first original Okies that came out. Then, of course, they died off, and then their kids.

Newcomers from Arkansas:--A Personal Opinion

M. Williams: They made a success out of it. Without stereotyping, because I didn't meet everybody from Arkansas--but the ones that I happened to meet, they did seem like they were just a little bit--how can I say? I don't want--

Dunning: You might as well say it.

M. Williams: I don't want to say they were ignorant, because they weren't ignorant. It was just that they were backwards, like a lot of the blacks that came.

M. Williams: I read one time that the people that had any kind of substance, they stayed. They didn't come out to work in the shipyards, which stands to reason. These were the ones that were more or less drifters anyway, that came out here.

At first I found the blacks to be shocking because [they were] the ones I came in first contact with. I found them to be very shocking because they did things that we wouldn't have dreamed of doing. Things are not like that now, but we were living in the housing project.

Dunning: In Oakland?

M. Williams: Yes. My husband and I. First we stayed with his parents, and then we were able to get in the housing project, which was a big deal in those days, to get in the housing project. But then they had opened up to these people coming to work in the shipyards, and eventually they just took over the housing project, and the first thing you wanted to do was to get out of there, because they didn't have any--well--the first time I ever saw anybody having sexual relations in a car was in the project.

They would be out in the car. Me and other girls, we were just shocked. Some way word would get around, and sure enough you look out there and you see them--It wouldn't be broad daylight, so to speak, but it would be light enough that you could see what was going on. And they didn't think a thing about it. I know nowadays that's nothing at all, but I mean at that time it was really shocking.

Then their kids. The kids would go around all day and they wouldn't be fed. They would look like they needed to be bathed and their heads combed.

M. Williams: I'm talking about the blacks. They were just seedy people, the ones that we saw.

Then, when I moved to Richmond and I saw some of them out here, I said, there's no difference except for the color. They used to have them over there in San Pablo and in North Richmond, San Pablo mostly.

Most of the Arkies, they moved to San Pablo. They had some over there, and they weren't any better than the blacks. You could just trade places, you know. I thought maybe it was because of the way they were brought up in Arkansas.

Then I read one time where some man had done a study where--I'm beginning to get off the track--but he said Arkansas, West Virginia, part of Texas, all those people in there, they have like a deficiency because they don't have any iodine. As a result of that, you know how you read pictures about the old mountaineers and all that?

He said that that's true in some cases because of the fact that they're deficient in iodine, and they have very low thyroid [levels]. That's why they appear to be shuffling. Have you ever heard that before?

Dunning: Actually, I have heard of it, but I haven't thought about it.

M. Williams: They had cases documented from that. That might be the reason why the people that you see from that part of the country do seem to be more slower mentally. Do you know what I'm trying to say? I remember when we were in school, the kids that they did let in, they weren't any dumber than anybody else. All they had to do was just get caught up.

M. Williams: Once they got caught up they were just as smart as anybody else. They were from Oklahoma.

Then, I know when my kids were in school here in Richmond, when they started going to school, they said then that the schools in Richmond were being brought down because they had so many kids in the classes that were mentally deficient, and it was bringing all the other classes down because of the fact that the scholastic scores were below the norm. That's what they figured out it was.

That was the same way in San Pablo, where they had a lot of the white kids whose parents or grandparents had come from Arkansas. That's true. I don't know if he did any studies on that or not, but sometime you look into that, because this man did a whole case study.

I think they did it at the University of California about why some classes in Richmond and San Pablo schools were lower than the other parts of the Bay Area, and [they] came to find out they had a higher ratio of people in these two cities where the families came from Arkansas and parts of Texas than other schools. You never heard that before?

Dunning: I've heard it but I don't know. It seems like such a strong stereotype--do you think it still exists today?

M. Williams: I do, because I had read not too long ago about some place in Virginia--not West Virginia, but Virginia, and that surprised me--they have a whole enclave of people there, and come to find out that they've been inbreeding for generations. They just keep among themselves.

M. Williams: They originally came from England during the American Revolution, and some of them migrated to Virginia from Washington. This one man, and his family, and his cousins, whatever, his brothers, they've been inbreeding down through there. These people, they said that it wasn't bad enough that they were living in the area that's very low in iodine, plus they had this problem with inbreeding.

They said that as a result of that, they have a whole lot of people, generations of people, that branch off from that man, and almost all of them, or some, are a bit mentally deficient. They mention there about the lack of iodine in the soil, too.

I have reason to believe, because the people I have met around here, some of them, I don't think they know how to read. It's not that they don't want to read, because I had one of the ladies that lived across the street and she wanted to read so bad she didn't know what to do.

She came from Arkansas. She thought she knew how to read, but she didn't. The teachers had said that they knew how to read, but they don't really teach them how to read.

Dunning: Do you think that has something to do with the educational system that lets their children graduate from a particular class and move on to the next class without learning basic skills, because it's easier for them to move kids on? You still read about it now--kids who graduate from high school and are basically illiterate.

M. Williams: Yes. And that's out here in California.

Interaction Between Southerners and Californians:
Post-World War II

Communication Problems

Dunning: It seems like you've really seen a lot of changes in the Bay Area.

M. Williams: Oh, yes.

Dunning: Particularly being black in the Bay Area, there was such a huge influx brought on by World War II. We spoke briefly the last time about how that changed your life here in terms of housing and services at stores.

M. Williams: They brought a lot of that prejudice with them from the South. The whites brought a lot of it out with them. So did the blacks. Like I was saying, I had two nice neighbors that lived right next to here in that other house. They were both around my age. They were white girls. We had my kids around the same time she had her kids. We had good communication, you know.

Dunning: This was in the late forties?

M. Williams: We moved here in '46, so that was about from '46 to about '50. I got along very well. I could communicate with them, because I sewed, and they used to sew. We would exchange recipes just like housewives. Not chummy, chummy, like go to the movies together, but we were just housewives. You know how.

I had one of my other lady neighbors, a black lady, say to me, "Why do you spend so much time with those peckerwoods?" I told you that word.

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Southern_Blacks_Meet_Native_Californian_Blacks_

Dunning: We were talking about your neighborhood in the late 1940s.

M. Williams: Well, there was more than that. I meant these two neighbors, like we all had our children at the same time. We all had something in common with the kids. The kids played together. But like I say, the people around here, the black people, they were very outdone about it. You know, "Why do you spend so much time talking to those peckerwoods?" and all that.

The blacks came out here feeling that the whites and blacks were going to be like cats and dogs; they're not going to ever get along. But you see, I never had that problem with whites. I tell people that to this day.

I hope nobody hears me saying this, because I could get hung on a pole for saying it, but that's why I could never relate to Martin Luther King. I was working for the navy at the time that he came into being. Everybody out there that I worked with, the ones that I worked with, blacks, they thought he was the greatest thing next to Jesus Christ. I couldn't see it. To me, he was just another minister.

But it was because I never had that black experience in the South. I never had that where you go in stores and the people won't wait on you, you have to go to another window and all that. I never had that, so I never knew what it was like.

M. Williams: But the black people in the neighborhood here that moved in, plus other blacks from the South, they had been through all that.

As a result of that, they just had an ingrown dislike of white people. Anybody else that talked to white people, there was something wrong with you. It really put me on the defensive. I never did like it and I don't like it to this day, because as I said, one of my best friends was a white girl.

She and I, we used to crack jokes and everything. We got along good together. I would call her and she would call me. The other blacks in the department, they thought that I spent too much time with her. I don't like that. I really don't like that at all. I never did. I would think that why can't you get along with a person? Why does that have to come into it? See what I'm saying? I mean, it's not like I pushed myself on her or she pushed herself on me. We just got along good together.

I've always had that problem all my life relating to other blacks. It wasn't like that in Oakland, in Oakland itself, because the people that I went to church with, they had grown up in Oakland, were born and raised in Oakland and had grown up there. They grew up in white neighborhoods and went to school with white kids, and there wasn't that feeling that the white people were your enemy. Do you know what I'm saying? We never had that feeling.

Of course, you know, jobs. I look back on it now, and I would be stupid if I said there wasn't any prejudice, because as far as jobs were

M. Williams: concerned, there was a lot of jobs that you couldn't get. But that's just because of the times that we lived in.

Dunning: Do you think it was because there was such a small number of blacks in the Bay Area at that time?

M. Williams: Not in Oakland, no.

Dunning: I mean compared to later on.

M. Williams: No, I think it was just at the time that things hadn't opened up yet.

My husband and I, we both had an experience. We were fishing one time and another family came down. My husband happened to mention that he was a native son. That's another thing that doesn't go very well with other blacks. I don't know why, but if you say that you're a native son or native daughter they get outraged, and then they want to even challenge you on it, because they said that if you feel like you're a native son, you feel like you're better than they are. That has nothing to do with it at all.

He just happened to mention that he was a native son, and this man was ready to jump him. He talked about, "You people, that's the reason why California is the way it is now. We had to come out here and open up the jobs and everything. You people sat back and let them people walk all over you." And all that kind of talk.

It was just that things hadn't opened up. Even at that time, like I was saying how they were prejudiced towards the Okies. It was anybody that was different. Like Chinese, Japanese, Mexicans, all of us, we had to do menial work because everything else was mostly white.

M. Williams: Then they got to the place where they did start opening up jobs, because I remember that in Oakland, especially, they had quite a few people. You would go downtown and you would see girls working behind counters in the department store. This was before the war. Then you would see them, they would be like--Well, for example, we had postage carriers that were black.

So jobs were beginning to open up before the war, but people say now that things didn't open up until after the war, but that isn't true, because I can remember before the war when things were beginning to open up. It was just a matter of course.

Marguerite Williams' Work Experience

First Job as Mother's Helper

Dunning: In terms of your own life, what kinds of jobs did you have? What was your first job?

M. Williams: My first job was what they used to call a mother's helper. Now it's a baby sitter. After school you could get those jobs. They were a dime a dozen because they didn't pay anything. But I mean it was just my first work experience.

I started when I lived in Stockton. My first job was actually when I was eleven because my sister had had the job. She would go over there after school and watch these two little girls for their mothers. Their mothers had a job in the evening. They had a cafe. My sister would stay over there with the little girls until the mothers

M. Williams: came home. She would feed them their dinner and put them to bed. Then they would bring her home.

When she got the job in Oakland, they asked me did I want it. Well, I was only eleven years old. My father didn't want me to, but my mother said it was all right because they could use the money, because things were pretty rough right then. I didn't mind. They said I had to keep my studies up, because if I dropped behind in my studies I couldn't have the job. I was looking forward to it because it gave me a chance to be away in the evening.

Dunning: But you were living at home at this time?

M. Williams: Yes. I would go over there after school, and then one of the ladies would be there waiting for me with the two little kids.

I cooked and helped get the kids' dinner. Not any big cooking, like mostly warm up food, and then stay with them until the mothers came home. I would do my studies, and then they would bring me home.

I did that for about a couple of years, and then my father said that I was getting home too late, and I was getting behind in my studies, so he called it off. That was when I was about thirteen.

Babysitting in Oakland

M. Williams: Right after that we left and came to Oakland, and I got a job as a baby sitter for a family in Oakland. I worked for them for about ten years off and on.

M. Williams: When she had a baby she called me to come and help with the kids, even though I really didn't have to work. I had my own kids.

I did it for a little while, but then it got too much like a slave thing so I had to cut it out because I didn't feel right about it. It was kind of like she was using me. After working at her house, I was too tired when I came home, and my own children were missing me.

Dunning: Was this a white family?

M. Williams: She was white and he was Jewish, which is a story in itself.

Dunning: You have a lot of little side stories.

M. Williams: It really was a story in itself though. She was nice to me, but it kind of like being a family retainer. I had three children of my own. She wanted me to come out there for the summer and help her during the summer with her children.

Dunning: And live in?

M. Williams: Yes. And then I would come home on the weekends. I asked her. I said, "What about my kids?"

She said, "Well, you can bring them."

I said, "Well, I don't want to uproot them like that."

Dunning: What about your husband?

M. Williams: That too. Plus I had my mother-in-law living here, and her sister. She said she would pay me, and it would be like a little vacation for the kids. I

M. Williams: got to thinking about it. I said it would be nice because I could get away from my mother-in-law and her sister for a while.

I said, "No," because that's just like being a family retainer. That's when we broke off, but that had been since from about 1938 to 1946.

That was really the first job that I had for a long time. Then with the kids being small, my husband wanted me to stay and help take care of the kids. He didn't want me to go off to work, which would be hard anyways with four kids.

I took the post office test in '46. That was the first civil service test I ever took, and I got one of the highest scores. After that they would call me at Christmas, and I worked there during Christmas. They weren't too much on hiring women at that time, you know, permanent. That's what I did for a long time. The main job I had was that in the post office.

Dunning: And you would do that seasonally?

M. Williams: Yes. It was a long time before I tried to get steady work. I used to just put in applications, but there wasn't anything going. I didn't want to do domestic work. It just didn't appeal to me. I did do babysitting sometimes when I needed--with that many kids at home, money gets kind of scarce.

I think I got another babysitting job, because I had just got on this babysitting job when I got a call from the Civil Service, and I got Civil Service jobs from then on in. I would just take temporary jobs.

Dunning: When the wartime industry boomed, did you ever apply to work in the shipyards?

M. Williams: No, I didn't. There was one job I applied for. There was some kind of a little small factory down there in West Oakland, not far from where we were living. I can't think of what it was, but it was a small factory, and they were doing defense work. Some of the girls in the project, they got on over there.

The only thing about it was, you have to work such long hours, and I knew I wanted to be with my kids. Back then, my husband had to go in the service. It was just me, and the three children, and my sister. She was living with me then. I didn't want to do it with the kids, so I just made it off of what money we had saved, and then the money that he sent me. I didn't go for defense work.

Decision Against World War II Shipyard Work

Dunning: It's interesting because I naturally assumed that a lot of people that were living in the Bay Area would get jobs in the shipyards, but from the people that I've talked to in Richmond, most of them either didn't go into the shipyards, or they just kept their own jobs because they could see down the road a few years when the war ended.

M. Williams: Yes, that's true. I've talked to any number of women who were living out here before the shipyard boom. They said the same thing, that they didn't go to the shipyard. They got another kind of job because jobs were opening up all over, or if they had had a job before. A lot of them were just getting out of school too, at that time when the

M. Williams: shipyard boomed. Most of the people you're going to find that worked in the shipyard were people that came from out of state.

Dunning: Were you ever tempted? There were pretty hefty wages for that time.

M. Williams: Yes, I was. I was tempted because of the money, but then, actually, the women, they looked so mannish. I didn't think I would be able to handle that because it looked like it was more manual labor than it was just labor. I talked to a lot of people that knew people who worked in the shipyards, and they said it was hard work. The women had to work like men.

Dunning: But the women did pretty well as welders, and riveters, and every kind of job.

M. Williams: They did. Oh yes, yes, they did. But I think an assembly line job was easier. The different factories, like the Ford plant, started to say that they would prefer people that could really work hard labor. I knew I couldn't because I couldn't even handle the work at the cannery. It was too hard. It was what you call slave labor. I never could do that kind of work. I tried working in the cannery. It was too much for me.

Dunning: Is this the Filice-Perrelli cannery?

M. Williams: No, this was Del Monte in Oakland. They were hiring because of getting the food for the soldiers. I think I worked about six weeks, and that was enough for me. It was easy to get on at the cannery and laundries. But I would only take little jobs that were just part time. I did a lot of little part-time jobs because I didn't want to be away from the kids because it was hard to get a baby sitter.

Dunning: When was your first child born?

M. Williams: It was 1941, just before Pearl Harbor.

Dunning: Then when was the next one?

M. Williams: Two years. The first three of them were two years apart. Then my husband came home from the service when my other one was ten months, so there was-- '43, '45, '46. She was born in the last part of '46, so there was less than two years.

When I was saying that about people in the shipyards--that it was mostly out-of-town people who worked there--the local people, these people that had been in the area for a long time, most of them went to the government shipyards. Like my husband, he went to Mare Island in 1940. He got a job in Mare Island. Almost all the local people, they got jobs like in Mare Island shipyard.

Dunning: Actually, one other man I interviewed that knew Harry Williams when he was young, Stan Nystrom, he got a job at Mare Island, and he said the pay was quite a bit less than the shipyards.

M. Williams: Yes, that's right.

Dunning: He still was thinking it would be more secure, and he stayed there.

M. Williams: That's right. And that's what you'll find out. You're going to find out that it just kind of falls into a pattern. Most of the local people that had been around here, they got on at the government shipyards, any kind of government facility. Around that time they opened up Oakland Army base. A lot of local people got on there.

M. Williams: Then the people that came from out of town, that's when they opened up these private shipyards, like Moore Shipyard in Oakland and Kaiser Shipyard. Most of the people from out of town--from out of state I should say--they got those jobs. You didn't see too many local people work there. When you said that, about your talking to those people, that fits right into the pattern.

Defense Work at the Santa Fe Railway

Cleaning Troop Cars

M. Williams: Another big job here in Richmond was at Santa Fe, cleaning out the troop cars. They would bring all the troop trains. They would bring them to Richmond, and they would clean them.

Dunning: I hadn't heard that.

M. Williams: That was a booming industry during the war. All the troop trains. I don't know why they brought them. They brought them to Richmond, I guess, because Richmond being close to the--well--

Dunning: It was the terminus.

M. Williams: Is that what it was?

Dunning: The transcontinental terminus for their railroad was right at Point Richmond.

M. Williams: I don't know why, but it seemed like they said that Richmond, California, was where they sent all the troop trains to be cleaned and refitted.

M. Williams: That was what the women did. They would clean all the windows. They had to vacuum and everything, and get them ready for the next troop train. That was a little booming industry out here at the Santa Fe.

Dunning: They were actually hired by Santa Fe, or was that a federal job?

M. Williams: I'm pretty sure it must have been federal.

Dunning: Did you know anyone that worked that job at the Santa Fe? Any of your friends?

M. Williams: When we moved here, a lot of the women, they had worked at the Santa Fe during the war, and they were still living down in this area. They had kept a lot of them on just cleaning trains, period, after that job, after the war was over. In '46, the war was just about over then, so they didn't have any need for them to clean the troop trains, but they would keep them just to clean passenger cars and clean up the boxcars.

They had a lot of them around here, I guess around ten or twelve. They still had kept those jobs and they were living down in this area. They had a lot of the women from--I was telling about the Indian village.

Indian Village in the Santa Fe Yard, Richmond

Dunning: What can you tell me about the Indian village?

M. Williams: There was just kind of a little enclave over there. What it was, the Santa Fe, they hired a lot of the Indians from New Mexico, and they gave them housing

M. Williams: in Richmond. A lot of them brought their families out here because they got free housing.

But what you call housing, oh my goodness, they were just pitiful. It was really pathetic. I know I got in trouble right off because I wrote a letter about it to the paper. I just said that it was terrible that a big industry like Santa Fe would put those people in those little hovels. That's all they were: little hovels. They weren't even as big as this room.

Dunning: Were they wooden?

M. Williams: Yes. They were wood, little wooden shacks. They wouldn't have to worry too much about heat because they were so small, but then sometimes they would have to go out looking for firewood.

We were all in the P.T.A. together. It just happened that around that time we got one Indian lady coming to a P.T.A. meeting. They're very shy and they didn't mingle too much. She came one time. She was younger. She started coming to P.T.A. Myself and this other black lady, we talked her into asking more of the ladies to come.

She said, "No, they're old-fashioned. They don't like to be around other people."

We told her to just bring them. We'll make them welcome. We did. We finally had about--at one time we must have had about ten or twelve Indian ladies coming to P.T.A. The principal, he was so proud, because he said that he had been trying for so many years to get them to come. Mr. West, he's such a nice person. He said he had been trying so hard to get them to become part of the community. He thanked us for making them welcome.

M. Williams: We all got on well together, so a couple of times we went over there just to say, "Hi." That's when I saw the way they were living.

I asked one of them, I said, "Why don't they give you better housing?"

The woman said, "Because they feel like if we don't like it here we can go back to the reservation. You know, they're doing us a favor."

You ought to see the houses. They would give them the housing in lieu of salary. Those guys were working for the Santa Fe practically for nothing because they were letting them bring their families, live over here, and just giving them the mere pittance.

One winter it was real cold, and I saw one of the ladies out looking for firewood. I asked her didn't they have any wood. She said, "No." because the Santa Fe had given them some ties, but they used them all up.

I put a letter in the paper about the firewood, and I said to contact Mr. West. I told him about it. He didn't see anything wrong with it, but the Indian women got outraged about it because they said that it hurt their pride, the fact that I was acting from charity. I had to apologize to them.

I said, "Well, I was just doing it out of the goodness of my heart."

They said they understood, but it made it look like they were looking for charity, and that Santa Fe wouldn't go for that. They would be thinking that they were out here begging, and then they would make them go back to the reservation.

M. Williams: Santa Fe had those people so cowed that they thought that they were actually doing them a favor letting them live in those little shacks. And that was in lieu of salary. If they didn't bring the family out here, the guy would get a little bit more, but if he brought his family, they provided housing and he had to take less salary.

Dunning: How large a community was it out there?

M. Williams: They had about fifteen families. Each one of them, they had these little bitty houses. The only way they would get relief was if one of the girls would get married. Then if her husband was working for the Santa Fe, well then they would get a house. Other than that, they would have about six or seven kids, so eight people were living in one little shack not much bigger than this room. It was not even this big. They had little dividers for the mother and the kids. It was really deplorable, really.

Dunning: When did this start?

M. Williams: I don't know.

Dunning: Well, the years that you're talking about, is this in the late 1940s?

M. Williams: That was in 1950. You see, my boy, he started school as soon as we came here. He started over here at Peres in 1946, kindergarten. Then around about 1950 I got very active in the P.T.A., so that was around about 1950. But they still have their houses over there. Every once in a while I run into one of the women.

Dunning: About how many people live over there now?

M. Williams: I don't know, because I'm no longer with the P.T.A.

Dunning: Where exactly was it?

M. Williams: Okay, let me tell you. If you leave here in your car, go down here to this next street, which is Ripley, and you go all the way to Ripley and First Street. Make a right on First, go all the way to the end, and you'll see Pennsylvania where it curves. Right there they have a little thing you go out on the track. You'll see a little space for trucks. They go over the track right there.

When you get over the track, you make a sharp left. They have a little road that goes around there, and it takes you right to the Indian Village. The road comes out at Castro, in Point Richmond. If you didn't want to go this way, you could catch the road over there in Castro in Point Richmond. You know after you go past the light, you know that road that goes around? It comes right to behind the Santa Fe yards. Then you can come on around and it comes right over there by the Indian Village.

Dunning: Is it actually visible from the road?

M. Williams: Yes, you can see it. They live right on the road. The last time I was over that way must have been about five or six years ago. We were looking for aluminum cans and we used to take a shortcut through there to go over to Point Richmond. They were living there at the Indian Village. In fact, I've seen one of the ladies here about five or six years ago. It's been about that long since I've seen one of them.

I met her downtown. I didn't think that was where she was still living, over there, though. We just spoke briefly because her kids are grown and my kids are grown. You always hear about how big industry takes advantage of little people, and you

M. Williams: don't ever really relate to it, but that really opened my eyes. They had those people actually believing that they were doing them a favor.

When we first moved here, down there where they have St. John's apartments. We're at the far end, the one bordering on Garrard. There used to be some little stucco houses there, little bitty. I swear, those little stucco houses, they weren't any bigger than those aluminum storage sheds you can buy.

That was another part of the Indian Village. That had really been an Indian Village at one time, but it belonged to Santa Fe. They owned all that land. Some of the people were still living there from years back. I guess they didn't work anymore, and they stayed over here in the village part. It was actually an Indian village in the true sense of the word.

But not too long after that, Santa Fe sold it to the city or something, and they tore those houses down. My boy remembers them because he used to go down that way looking for polliwogs. You know how boys are. There used to be a big vacant lot all down here, but at the far end they had about five or six of these little stucco [houses]. You ask some of the old-timers, they'll tell you.

When they built those projects [St. John's Apartments], a lot of people said that the Indians got upset about it because they said that they had graves over there, and they built on top of that. They got upset about that. I imagine that if they were to start excavating they would find Indian relics down there.

Dunning: I know you said you could only do this for an hour, so--

M. Williams: I got long winded, huh?

Dunning: No, you have a terrific memory.

M. Williams: Anything else you wanted me to tell you pertinent to Richmond?

Postwar Era in Richmond

[Interview 3: July 9, 1985]##

Dunning: During our last session we went through quite a bit of material. We talked about your great great grandmother and the freed slave community which she helped start, and your mother's route to California, your childhood in Stockton, and finally your move to the Bay Area, specifically Richmond.

We got up to about the war period, or right after the war when you moved to Richmond. I'd like to start from there. I'm wondering if you could tell me if the closing of the shipyards affected you and your family.

M. Williams: No, because my husband, he worked for the Navy. They never did close.

Dunning: What about in terms of the population? Did you see people leaving after that?

M. Williams: Oh, yes. Yes, Richmond, just like overnight the population dwindled. We moved here in 1946. The population was still up pretty high, even when the shipyards were beginning to wind down, but then, I'd say, in maybe about a year's time, it seemed like it just dwindled real bad. Houses were going up for sale and there were a lot of vacancies. At

M. Williams: one time, you couldn't even hardly rent a room in Richmond, but then everything started dwindling down. A lot of people tried to relocate.

We had a lot of businesses in Richmond. They had movie theaters and drugstores, all that. It was a nice little community down there. It started falling off.

Dunning: Did you see that change right after the war, or did that happen later because of the redevelopment?

M. Williams: No, because you see, the war actually ended in '45, and then there was still a little period of prosperity up until around about '46, '47, mostly '46. People were coming home from the war and they had money to spend.

They were still winding down the shipyards and the defense industry. Then they said that Ford was gearing up to build the new cars because everybody wanted a car, so they had people working at the Ford plant.

Right after that, I don't know what happened, but it seemed like all of a sudden everything closed down, right about the last part of '46, '47. We moved to Richmond in June of '46. There was one thing I noticed--that it was really congested.

Dunning: So Richmond was still pretty crowded with a high population when you moved here?

M. Williams: Yes, but then it seemed like in '47 everything started going down. The stores wouldn't be as crowded. It happened just like that, almost overnight.

M. Williams: Then, I remember, around that time rumor got out that Ford was going to move to Milpitas because they wanted to expand and Richmond wouldn't let them. Richmond said no they weren't going to give them any more property. So Ford got mad and they said they were going to move to Milpitas because they had a chance to buy more land out there.

They had no sooner opened up, I'm trying to say, to build the new cars, and then a lot of people started getting nervous about their jobs. I think a lot of people actually left around that time to buy land out in Milpitas. I know a lot of people that worked at Ford moved out there.

I'm not too sure about the exact chronology. You could check that out, but I know the main thing was the shipyards closing down. [Ford Motor Company moved their plant from Richmond to Milpitas in 1954.]

Dunning: When the shipyards closed, it also took fifty-seven war industries that were connected with it. Last time you talked about the cleaning of the troop cars. That was a war industry. Were some of the laundries doing work for the defense department?

M. Williams: Yes, that's right. They had a big laundry down on Macdonald Avenue. I know because I tried to get on. I knew I couldn't work, but I thought I would just fill out the application anyway. The laundry was before you get to the underpass, around Seventeenth and Macdonald. They had contracts to do laundry. I went in and put an application in, and they told me that they weren't hiring because they were getting ready to lay some people off. It was a real big, huge laundry.

Dunning: Were you working during that period? I know you had three babies at that time.

M. Williams: Yes. And I was pregnant, expecting my fourth child. You mean after the war?

Dunning: Yes.

M. Williams: No. When we moved here, no. Like I say, it just happened that my mother-in-law and her sister had come out here with us when we moved from Oakland to Richmond. With that many women in the house, my mother-in-law told me if I wanted to get a job she would watch the babies, because she heard me say that I would like to get a job to help out.

She said she would watch the kids for me, so that's why after my youngest child, my girl, was born in November, then I started getting anxious to go to work. It was mostly to get away from the house, to be frank. That's when I started looking around for a job.

I got a job part time at the post office. I think I got it that year. I worked there during Christmas rush, but it wasn't that long. Anyway, I couldn't work too long because my baby was too young. But I wasn't really working, no, nothing permanent.

Buying Property in a Predominantly White
Neighborhood

Dunning: I always ask people about their neighborhood. How would you describe this neighborhood when you moved in, and would you talk about some of the changes that you have seen over the years? [location is at Third Street and Nevin]

M. Williams: Well, mostly everybody in the neighborhood had been here a long time. My husband said that a lot of them he knew when he was a kid.

He used to come over here all the time to play with the Mexican boy that lived across the street. They were real chummy. Then they had Mexicans, and then mostly everybody else was white, except the lady about four doors down. They had just moved in. They were a black couple. But everybody else was almost white.

Dunning: This was when you moved to Third Street in '46.

M. Williams: Yes, June of '46. It was predominantly white. Even though they have a lot of Mexicans around here, this particular area was mostly white. They had a Mexican family, and a couple down the street, but everything else was white.

Dunning: I remember Harry, last time, saying that there was that restricted covenant and--

M. Williams: Yes, yes.

Dunning: --that the real estate people would knock on people's doors and say that--

M. Williams: No, not then. At that time it was definitely restricted covenant, because we tried to get several different other houses in Richmond, and they had the restricted covenant. But it just happened that the boy across the street, the Mexican boy, Morales, he knew the house was getting ready to go up for sale, so he told us before they put the sign up.

There was a white family that moved here during the war. They wanted to sell because they wanted to get a smaller house. She had room for

M. Williams: the shipyard workers, so she wanted to sell the house. She was so anxious to sell, and especially when my husband had a G.I. loan, that she didn't even care about what the neighbors said.

She told us. She said that some of the neighbors, after they had seen us come here and they were asking her what she was getting ready to do and she told them, they got upset about it. She came out and told us. My husband said he didn't want to get her in any trouble.

She said, "Forget it. I want to sell the house. It's my house and I want to sell it."

That's why we didn't have any trouble getting this house, but other people said they had trouble, even in this little old ratty neighborhood. They had trouble buying houses even though at that time there were two black families. There was our family and then the one about two doors down. They had just moved in.

One lady told me later that the neighbors had signed a pact, and they wouldn't sell to any more blacks. She said that the real estate agent told her that people had signed a little pact that they wouldn't sell to any more blacks, even though they were trying to outlaw the restricted covenants. That was among themselves.

But then, one would break down and put their house up for sale, and they couldn't get anybody else but blacks, so eventually more and more blacks started moving in.

Block Busting

M. Williams: At that time what happened, we had a white real estate man come through here. My neighbors--these two girls on the other side--were both white. They told me that he came through and asked them if they wanted to sell their house because the neighborhood was getting ready to turn, and he could get a good price for them for the house if they wanted to sell.

They didn't want to sell, and they went on ahead and stayed, but a lot of them did, they gave in to that. I think they call it busting, block busting. They had the real estate people come right through here. It gives you a very bad feeling.

Disputes with the Neighbors

Dunning: Were you nervous when you moved into this neighborhood, it being predominantly white?

M. Williams: No, I wasn't nervous. I was angry all the time though, because when I would go out, the different neighbors would roll their eyes and look at me like, "We don't want you here."

It just made me angry. I got very resentful of it. I just got to the place where I wouldn't even speak to them. Before, I would try to make friends and speak.

Except for the two girls on the other side here. They were both really great people, not because they were nice to me, but they were just

M. Williams: down to earth. They had kids. One of them was Miss Mary. They both were church girls. But they were just nice. It wasn't being condescending or anything like that. They were just nice people. But the rest of them around here, they were really prejudiced.

Dunning: How was it for your children?

M. Williams: I had to keep them home, especially my boy, because he was only about five years old, and they used to blame him for everything. Windows would get broken, and they would come over and knock on the door and say, "Your boy broke my window."

He was just a little five-year-old kid. They called the police and said that my boy broke in their mailbox. I was always fighting with the neighbors about things like that.

I said, "I know you don't want us here, but don't try to get my kids in trouble."

Things like that. That was all. Little nasty incidents.

Dunning: How did your husband handle it?

M. Williams: He would be gone all day. I would catch the brunt of it because he would be over at the shipyard [Mare Island] all day, and I would be here with the kids. He told me not to pay attention to them, they were just a bunch of rednecks. Then a neighbor came over and told him that our boy had broken the window. He was getting ready to spank the boy.

I said, "No. Wait a minute." I said, "He's only five. How could he break the upstairs window?"

M. Williams: Then Harry told the guy that he didn't want any more trouble out of him, that he had as much right to be here as he did. After that he didn't have too much to do with them.

It was just ugly. It kind of turned me off on a lot of people. Other than that, I was so busy with the kids I really didn't have that much time.

Problems in Childrens' Education

Dunning: Did the children go to schools right in this neighborhood?

M. Williams: Yes. My boy did. He was the only one that was going to school at that time when we first moved here. He was in kindergarten. The rest of them, they were too young. They all went to school over here at Peres.

That's another thing I'd like to say. Now I'm not just walking around with a chip on my shoulder, but you actually had teachers at that time--I don't know if it was commonplace, but from the different ones I've talked to, they said the same thing--they weren't used to teaching little black boys. It was mostly the boys, not the girls, but the boys.

I talked to several women that had kids that grew up with my oldest boy, my only boy. They didn't want to be bothered with those little black boys, and they would tell them right off that they weren't able to learn. They would actually tell them that.

M. Williams: My boy, they told my boy. He wanted to take college prep when he went to junior high, and come to find out a lot of things that he should have been getting right from the beginning, like more math, they weren't giving him.

Tracking in the Public Schools

M. Williams: They had tracks. They put a lot of the blacks, and Mexicans too--not just the blacks and Mexicans, but some of the kids from, like we had quite a few little white kids from this area that came out from the shipyards. They put all of them in a track where they just gave them the fundamentals, like in arithmetic and spelling. Nothing that would get them ready for when they left grammar school and went on to junior high. They didn't have the background.

Dunning: It was really determining their future.

M. Williams: Yes. They put them on tracks. That was the first time I ever knew about tracks like that. They said that so many of the black boys at that time, they had them on the slow learner tracks, because some teacher determined that these kids didn't want to learn. That bothered me that we had so much prejudice in the grammar schools.

That's when I finally went down to the board of education. One of them even said, "Well, a lot of those teachers, they've been teaching. They haven't had that many minority kids in their classes outside of Mexicans, and they always feel like the Mexican kids don't really want to learn."

M. Williams: As a result of that, they just dumped them all together, the Mexicans and the few blacks that were here.

Even then you would be surprised at how few blacks there were around here even though they had worked in the shipyards. On the South Side they had a lot of blacks. I guess they went to Nystrom School. But on this side we didn't have that many blacks, even after the war was over. A few came from North Richmond.

Then they built Verde School, so then they left Peres and went back to Verde. They built that school for the blacks and the Mexicans over on the north side of town.

But this tracking just really bothered me more than anything. I think I can take any kind of prejudice except when it comes to education. That really bothered me.

At Peres, we had a woman principal. It seemed like she would always have these little kids in the office. Like my boy would tell me that, "Me and so-and-so had to go to the office today." Either a Mexican or a black.

I said, "What happened?"

He said, "I don't know. The teacher said we were running in the hall, we were being noisy."

He couldn't have been more than about six or seven years old. So I started spending more and more time at the school. That's when I first got into the P.T.A., right back there.

Involvement_in_the_P.T.A.

M. Williams: I got into the P.T.A., and I was right in there. Of course, like I say, I think there was about two of us blacks on the P.T.A. I tried to get more blacks to come, but a lot of them were working and they had big families. We finally started integrating the P.T.A., but I did it out of necessity, not because it was social.

I just wanted to be there to find out what was going on, because by that time my other girl was in school, and I had another one getting ready to start the school.

When my boy finally got up to junior high, I went down there and I told them that I wanted him to be in college prep. They said that they didn't think that he was qualified. That's when I found out that he hadn't had enough arithmetic and subjects that he should have had when he was in grammar school.

I told them, "Well, put him in college prep anyway. If you can put him in there, we'll take care of the homework." And we did. We helped him with his homework so that he could keep his grades up.

But they really didn't want to put him in college prep. That bothered me. That made me angry. Because you know, at that time we were paying property tax like everybody else. It makes you more aware of the fact that we're treated as second-class citizens. I have rights too.

Dunning: Was your son able to catch up?

M. Williams: Yes. He was all right. He had a lot of heavy courses. But after all that I went through, when he got out of high school, the first thing he did was join the navy. I tried my best to get him to go on to college, but no, he wanted to go into the navy. It was just as well, because he got through it before the war started in the sixties.

My son talks now about going back to night school, but he doesn't do anything with it. He's too old now.

Dunning: He's in his forties?

M. Williams: Yes. You know, after a certain age, if you're not motivated, forget it.

Dunning: You mentioned that you went down to the school board. I just wondered, were you involved in local politics?

M. Williams: A couple of times, for example, they didn't have any blacks on the city council. This particular man, I had met him at a rally, and he was running for city council. I liked him. I thought that he had a lot to offer, but that was the first time that a black had actually tried to run for city council.

Dunning: Do you remember his name?

M. Williams: His name was Guthrie Williams. He was a minister. I liked what he had to say, because he felt like I did, that at the time you had quite a few blacks coming to Richmond buying property and paying taxes, and yet we didn't have any black representatives at all. I think we only had about one or two blacks on the police force. We had one

M. Williams: during the war, and then they hired one right after. We didn't have any blacks on the fire department.

I was with Guthrie Williams, so I went out and passed out papers for him. That was the only time I ever did that, because he didn't even get close to being elected.

Dunning: What decade was this?

M. Williams: That was in the fifties.

Richmond_in_the_1950s

Dunning: What was Richmond like in the fifties? You hear a lot about what it was like during World War II and what it was like before the war.

M. Williams: I think it was pretty nice. I look back on that time, because like I say, a lot of people that were going to go back home, they had gone back home. Other people, they were settling down and buying houses and trying to keep Richmond like it was. In other words, like having the stores downtown. But you know, with so much business leaving, you could see stores starting to close down one by one. We still had a nice downtown, a little commercial center. It was pretty nice.

Departure_of_Downtown_Businesses

Dunning: And there were the major shops. Penney's was down there, and Macy's was there.

M. Williams: Yes. Macy's came in the fifties. That was a big event when Macy's opened up. That was something, a big store like Macy's. You know, "Wow!" I remember that was a great time. Everybody was excited about that. I don't know why. It just seemed like the businesses couldn't survive. The people just didn't support the businesses like they should have.

That was another thing that used to bother me. A lot of the white people, they got to the point where they wouldn't come downtown. For one thing, like Macy's for example, they broke down. They started hiring blacks and Mexicans to work in the store, which had never been heard of before. At that time Penney's was almost strictly white. All the clerks were white despite the fact that they had a lot of blacks shopping there, and Mexicans.

They wouldn't break the color line, but Macy's did. They came and they had black girls working in cosmetics and in different departments. Instead of those little silly white people patronizing them and keeping the store, no, they wouldn't shop here.

They said, "Well, it was too dangerous," and all that, and they didn't want to come downtown. Eventually they lost their business. They didn't have the people to patronize them.

Dunning: Do you think that's the major reason?

M. Williams: Yes. I know it is, because even like on Macdonald Avenue, they had a Kress store and little dress shops. It got to the point that the only people that would be patronizing them would be blacks and the Mexicans.

M. Williams: A lot of the whites had moved out of the area. They had moved over by the high school on the other side of Twenty-third Street, which was supposed to have been a better class of people there and all that. It wasn't restricted, but at the same time, they were keeping it pretty much white.

The whites wouldn't come back downtown and shop. They would go over to San Pablo and shop, or go to Berkeley, before they would come to downtown Richmond. Eventually the stores just started falling off. I think it was because of that, what they call that "white flight."

They wouldn't even come downtown and patronize the stores. You would go in the stores and it would be almost all Mexican, or a few whites, and mostly blacks shopping. We lost almost all of our stores because of that.

Dunning: I was under the impression that most of the stores got torn down during the sixties because of redevelopment.

M. Williams: A lot of the houses got bought up by redevelopment. That was another big old ripoff. Because like if you go down this street here, Barrett, all up and down Barrett they have little one family houses. You know, single family dwellings, all down Barrett, all down Nevin, and all these little streets in between. So redevelopment started buying up all those houses.

The houses stood empty for two or three years. Nobody had done anything. People had to move out. I remember that because that was the most stupid thing they ever did in Richmond, really. Right now you still have empty lots where they tore these houses down.

M. Williams: And, like you say, they had businesses too. They had a big Lucky store right there on Ninth and Nevin, real nice. Almost everybody shopped in that Lucky's. They closed them out because they wanted that land for redevelopment. Where did Lucky's move? They moved way up on San Pablo Avenue. I know because I used to shop there all the time.

A lot of people moved out because they took their house. They didn't come on back down here and shop. It was hard on business. It really was hard on business.

Hilltop Mall

M. Williams: But I can't remember the redevelopment agency taking a lot of businesses per se. I know they took a lot of houses, but I think about the only one I can remember was that Lucky store because I shopped there and I knew about that one. Had you heard that a lot of stores were torn down?

Dunning: Yes.

M. Williams: In the fifties?

Dunning: In the 1960s. I've heard a few versions, but one is that what later became Hilltop Mall was actually supposed to be in downtown Richmond.

M. Williams: Yes, it was. That was a sell-out. It was a sell-out. And Nat Bates, that's why to this day I will not vote for him, because Bates of all people knew that we needed downtown business to bring Richmond back. That's why to this day a lot of people will

M. Williams: not vote for Bates, because he was one of the prime instigators of it, him and a couple other city councilmen we had at that time.

Standard Oil had all that land up there, which is Hilltop Mall. They would sell it to the city, and give them a deal because the land was just laying fallow. At the same time, Standard Oil would profit by it.

They sold out, and they decided to have the shopping area at Hilltop instead. That isn't Richmond, that's Pinole. Richmond gets the taxes, but even so, it's not like right downtown here.

Dunning: You really have to go out of your way and get on the freeway to get there.

M. Williams: Yes. I can go because I have a car, but I know a lot of people around here that have never been to Hilltop Mall in their lives, after all these years, because they don't have any way to get up there. If they want to shop, they get on the bus and go up to El Cerrito Plaza.

Dunning: Is that where most people will go from here?

M. Williams: Yes, down on south. It's easy to get the bus and go to El Cerrito Plaza, or go to Safeway up on Macdonald, than it is to go all the way up to Hilltop Mall.

Dunning: Plus they don't have any supermarkets at Hilltop Mall.

M. Williams: No. Well, they do now. They have one across the road though, but it's not really Hilltop Mall itself. But that was really wrong because they took all those jobs out of Richmond. But they made a deal.

Dunning: Did any Richmond residents protest that?

M. Williams: Oh, yes. A lot of people protested it. Oh, yes. There was a lot of protests about that. Especially the little merchants that we had left downtown. They were going to try to get a court order. We have a few little stores still left, hanging on in there. They tried. This man and his wife who owned about three little stores downtown, even got a court order to try to block them moving up to Hilltop. But it was to no avail. They had already signed all the contracts.

Dunning: Where do you do your shopping now?

M. Williams: Myself? Well, Hilltop Mall, or El Cerrito Plaza, or San Pablo.

Dunning: For groceries?

M. Williams: I go to Safeway.

Dunning: Safeway on San Pablo?

M. Williams: On Macdonald. Well, they have about two or three, but I usually go there. I'm not too much on shopping around. Then they have that Food Bowl too. But I don't shop too much around here, though.

The main reason why I don't shop too much around here is because of the fact that these guys [local merchants] don't have fresh foods. I notice a lot of times you get cans and it's backdated, so I'm not too much for that. If I'm going to buy food, I want it to be halfway fresh.

I wouldn't mind paying five or ten cents more for something, because if you figure the gas in there it's really not that much, but I know so many

M. Williams: times that their food, they don't turn it over, so it would be backdated. See what I'm saying? That's the main reason why I don't shop the neighborhood stores. It's not because of the two or three pennies more.

Lack of Entertainment in Richmond

Dunning: What about entertainment? There used to be four or five movie theaters in Richmond, and some dance halls. Now there doesn't seem to be--

M. Williams: Nothing. I blame that on the police though, because you see, at that time, I know over and over down through the years they've tried to reopen different movie theaters on Macdonald Avenue. The police won't let them because they said it would be a police problem.

They did have one theater. It was a little Rio theater. They hung in there for a long time. They even tried to make it a Mexican theater, just Mexican movies. The police would go in there and turn their lights on. The police really made it into a problem. They didn't want the theaters because they said it would be more work for them.

As a result of that, they just put thumbs down on any kind of thing like that, which I think was wrong. I know police have their jobs cut out for them, but still and all, you've got to give the citizens a few advantages.

You can always look at it ahead of time and say, "Well, it's going to be a police problem."

M. Williams: Give them a chance to make the first mistake. They won't even do that. A man wanted to open up a teenage dance hall on Macdonald Avenue. They wouldn't let him do it. They wouldn't give him a permit. They said it would be a police problem.

The police, I think they take so much on themselves when they do that. Eventually it might be a police problem, but give the people a chance. I know they tried over and over again to open up theaters down on Macdonald Avenue. The police would always step in. It would have to go before the police, and they would always put thumbs down on it.

That's one reason why we don't have theaters down there. I can tell you that ahead of time. I remember when it used to come up, because I thought it would be good because I had kids. They wanted to go to the show, and they had to go all the way to Berkeley to go to the theater before they opened up the Hilltop Cinema.

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Dunning: What would you do for entertainment?

M. Williams: You mean our kids?

Dunning: Yes.

M. Williams: We would take them to the drive-in when they were small, put them all in a carload and take them out to the drive-in.

Dunning: Where was that?

M. Williams: We had three drive-ins at one time in Richmond.

Dunning: Oh, right in Richmond?

M. Williams: Well, two of them were in San Pablo. They had two in San Pablo, and then they had that one new one they opened up up at Hilltop, so we had plenty of drive-ins. Or we would even go as far as Oakland drive-ins sometimes if something good was playing.

But our kids, sometimes I would take them to the matinee in Berkeley. They had a lot of matinees, and I would get a carload of kids and take them to the matinee. See, Berkeley never gave up their theaters. They have about five or six.

That's what I like about Berkeley, because the police are more in tune with the people. They had problems in Berkeley, but nothing like in Richmond. I think it had a lot to do with the police. That's hard to explain, though. I don't want you to think I'm anti-police because I'm not.

Dunning: The police definitely have a certain reputation around here, and a lot of people don't feel real safe with them.

M. Williams: You mean the Richmond police?

Dunning: Yes.

M. Williams: They came around too hard. They just come on putting everybody in the same boat, you know, "You guys are no good so we're going to do the hard line on you."

To me, that's like they're being the judge and the jury, and I never did care much for that. It's always been that way in Richmond. I know my boy, he used to get stopped all the time. When he was a kid, and he had never been fingerprinted or anything like that. They always stopped him.

M. Williams: There were too many kids committed at the Richmond Juvenile Hall. I had to go to the juvenile department. I had it out with them.

I said, "Any little black kid is not bad. You automatically assume that they're bad."

I was going to take it before the city council after they said that they couldn't control all the cops. Around that same time, a cop was hassling Mexican kids. The cop got shot, so they started easing up on that hard line. Do you know about that?

Dunning: This was in the 1960s?

M. Williams: Not in the late sixties. This would have been in the fifties. [incident occurred in 1964]

Dunning: Did that happen over by St. Mark's church?

M. Williams: Yes. That's what I was saying, they used to have a lot of hassle in the fifties. You asked about the 1950s. That was one of the things, when they had an awful lot of unrest. That's around the time when they started tearing down all the houses, and people were moving. They were uprooting a lot of people in the fifties.

It seemed like Richmond was just saying, "Well, now the war's over. Now we're going to go back to what we were."

They just started uprooting people. I told you it was pretty nice, but looking back on it, it was kind of rough times.

I remember now, that's when they had about four or five cops, and they had a bad reputation for hassling the blacks and the Mexicans, and even

M. Williams: the white kids, because the white kids liked to drag the main at that time, you know, go up and down Macdonald Avenue.

Some of the police would actually beat up on the kids. These are white kids now. They would actually pull them out of the cars and beat up on them.

But it was the Mexican kids and the blacks that got it the worst, especially the Mexicans, because they were beginning to let their voices be heard. There was one cop in particular, he was just real strict. He would hassle the Mexican kids, stop them and everything. He's the one that got killed over there by St. Mark's, because they said that he beat up on a couple of these Mexican boys real bad with his night stick. So the next time when he stopped them, well these two, they got him, they killed him.

Dunning: What happened to the kids?

M. Williams: They did time. One of them was a little more like an accessory, so he got out before the other one. I think, if I'm not mistaken, I don't know if he committed suicide or got in a wreck, but I think it was said that he was no more good after they let him out of prison. I think he did about five years. He stayed in trouble all the time, and I think eventually he committed suicide. He used to live down here on Third Street.

Dunning: What was the response of the community to that incident?

M. Williams: Surprisingly, nothing. You would think there would have been a big hue and cry for their heads, but there wasn't. There wasn't, because I think that everybody that lived around here still, they knew

M. Williams: about how the police were hassling these kids. They would. They would hassle them on the least pretext.

Dragging the Main, 1950s

M. Williams: Another thing that was ugly in the fifties is dragging the main. These kids would tie the streets up dragging the main. You would have a hard time getting across.

Like I said, the police didn't want that. Around the same time that the kids didn't have nowhere to go, they had no movie theaters or anything, and they were dragging the main over on San Pablo, but they didn't want them to do it in Richmond. Now I'm talking about these were white kids.

The police would pull them over. I think a couple of kids got their windshields broken out. This is when race started to get into it, because a lot of the black kids, they would save their money up and buy a car, and they would start dragging the main. Well, they would get tickets. That caused quite a big problem because people were starting to use a different standard for the blacks and Mexicans than they were the white kids.

Dunning: So the white kids wouldn't get tickets, they would just get stopped?

M. Williams: They would make them show identification, and check for any beer in the car, but then they would let them go on about their way.

M. Williams: But the black kids and the Mexicans, they would give them tickets. That came up a couple of times at the city council. It was right around there that we said we needed some blacks on the city council because we weren't getting representation.

That was in the fifties, and I think it was around that time that Bates started running for city council. But he wasn't the first one we had. I think Lonnie Washington was the first city councilman, if I'm not mistaken.

Dunning: Now Bates' full name is?

M. Williams: Nat. Nathaniel Bates. I used to work with him at the post office. I think at that time he used to be talking politics. That would have been in the 1950s. I worked for the post office in the fifties. That's when he started. He must have become a city councilman in the late fifties.

But all that time I think we only had Lonnie Washington. He used to be a police officer. He got on the city council because he had enough white people to support him too. But it was kind of rough around in the 1950s.

I had forgotten a lot of that stuff that went on, all that. Like I said, they were trying to get back to the way it was. Tearing down a lot of the houses to uproot the people. I think they said before the war--it kind of stuck in my mind--before the war I think Richmond had about three thousand people, or something like that.

Wartime Strain on Social Services and Education

Dunning: Actually, it was twenty-three thousand, but then the population went up to over one hundred and twenty-five thousand people.

M. Williams: Yes. Well, you say twenty-three. I think I had read one time it was like three thousand people. Almost overnight it went up about ten times the amount if you take in San Pablo, which wasn't incorporated at that time. Just like that, and it said that they couldn't handle it, the people here. They weren't ready for that.

Dunning: The population increase also put a strain on all the social systems: the schools, the fire department, the police department.

M. Williams: Right. You knew about that? Yes, it really was. They had schools on double session. I had forgotten about that. All the schools were on double session. When my boy started in '46, he went to the morning kindergarten. They had no sooner got out than they had the afternoon kindergarten.

That's always been like that, but then when he got into first grade they were still on what they called double session. Some of the kids would go to school for three hours in the morning. That bothered me because I didn't think that they were getting the full allotted time. But that only went on until they started building more schools to handle the problem, and it went back to normal. Had they ever told you about that double session?

Dunning: Yes, I have heard that.

M. Williams: That's when they built that school over at Verde, over in North Richmond, to handle a lot of the Mexicans and the blacks that lived on that side. Then a lot of people got upset about that because they said that they were segregating those kids. But in a way, they had to, because Peres was overcrowded.

Richmond's Historical Side

Dunning: Do you see Richmond as a historical place?

M. Williams: No. When I go to Point Richmond I do, because I can see the way it used to be. Well, I guess it could though, because it played a role. I think if you look at the impact that the war had on Richmond, as opposed to say Oakland. People came to Oakland to work in the shipyards, but they didn't make any impact. They just assimilated. But in Richmond, I think the war kind of turned Richmond around, I really do.

We used to come out to Richmond before the war, with the church, like the church would have hay rides when I was living in Oakland. Richmond was nothing but a great big old country town. That's what we always thought about Richmond, as being in the country. Then all of the sudden it became industrialized, and it stayed that way. More and more industry came here as a result of the war.

My husband said at one time, when he was a kid, all he could remember was the Standard Oil and Santa Fe, and that was about it, and Ford Motor Company. That was about it. All of those little chemical companies down there, he said they didn't

M. Williams: have all that. They came after the war, postwar industry. I used to go down and you could see all these chemical companies.

Influence of Richmond's New Affluent Population

Dunning: Speaking of the chemical companies, do you ever think about the whole issue of the toxic waste in the area, and the pollution?

M. Williams: Yes, I do. That's another thing. That's what I like about Richmond now. They got a whole bunch of new people coming into Richmond, so right now you're going to see a big change in Richmond, because they're selling the perimeters of Richmond, I guess you could say, to what I guess they call now yuppies [young urban professionals]. You go up here to Hilltop, they're building all these houses adjacent to the Hilltop Mall.

One of my daughters went up to look at them, and she said that they're nice, but they're too rich for her blood. So they're attracting a lot of people from San Francisco and Marin County, like young executives that can afford them. Then out here at Marina Bay you have all this housing that they're building.

Dunning: At Brickyard Landing, and Marina Bay.

M. Williams: See, those people, they're more or less affluent. They want a voice in Richmond. Their voice is that Richmond for too long has become industrialized, and they're not looking out for the people.

Like some people wanted to take over this old whaling factory out there. My husband said that

M. Williams: the building is rotting out. All of the sudden, everybody is taking an interest in that because it would be such a beautiful place. You could go out there and eat, you know, look out there on the bay.

What they want to do, Richmond wants to sell it to this guy that's got those chemicals out there [Pak Tank], and the people want it for the public. My husband got mad at me because I said that I think that they should have it for the people. We always like to go out there and sit and look out at the bay.

It would be nice if they could build another road in there so they wouldn't have to come through the navy property, because the navy is always uptight about the people using their roads. They could build around them. My husband said they could build a road right around upper Castro, come in there, and people could go out there and eat, and they could have a museum.

It would be wonderful for Richmond. No, but they want to sell it to this guy so he can expand his chemical place.

M. Williams: Another example is out there at the end of the Garrard tunnel.

Dunning: Petromark?

M. Williams: They want to expand. These new people would say, "No, that land should be more for the people." Which it should.

Richmond's got so much industry now. They have all that place in North Richmond. They tore down all those homes in North Richmond for industry. They've never used it. But no, they want to take all the waterfront.

M. Williams: Waterfront should belong to the people. I've always believed that, that we should be able to go down to the water when we want to. But they have all these places now, no trespassing. They have fences and everything. That's what I like about these new people. You're going to see a big change in Richmond. They're going to make their voices be heard.

Councilman David MacDiarmid

Encouraging Downtown Business

M. Williams: This guy wanted to build this Kentucky Fried Chicken downtown. He's a Chinese entrepreneur from Sacramento. They didn't want to give him a permit. They said they wanted to save that for office buildings. Finally this councilman from Point Richmond I think it is, MacDiarmid. Have you ever met him?

Dunning: I haven't met him.

M. Williams: He's great. I voted for him. He said, "Who's going to come to Richmond?"

You know, they've got office buildings going to waste in Oakland. They're not renting them out. Why not let anyone come in to bring in revenue? He put his voice in, so they let this Chinese guy open up Kentucky Fried Chicken.

Now, another guy's going to go right around the corner. He's going to open a fast food place, because of this one councilman, Dave MacDiarmid. He stood up for letting new business come in.

M. Williams: My goodness. Who's going to open up an office building down there? He's got some great ideas. I'm all for him. That's what we need. Richmond's too stagnant. As long as Santa Fe is there, and as long as Standard Oil is there, everybody thinks that everything is okay. You know, God is in his Heaven, all's right with the world. But we need new blood.

Dunning: The only thing is, do you think that it's going to make more of a separation between the people that don't have very much money in Richmond, and then the people that can afford those houses on the waterfront?

M. Williams: No, I don't think so.

Dunning: You think that will have a positive effect?

M. Williams: I do, because Point Richmond has always been there. Even when my kids were small, we used to go out there to the plunge for swimming, and go hiking. The people in Point Richmond always had a little bit of influence, but most of the people out there were old, and they didn't really want to get involved. I always thought of most of the people at Point Richmond as being more like hippie types. They really didn't want to get involved.

In earlier days, like people in Mira Vista, they had more influence. But now it seems like there isn't anybody in Richmond that really cares as long as everything is status quo.

When they had that big controversy about giving that guy at the end of the tunnel--what's that?

Dunning: Petromark?

M. Williams: Yes. But you see, there's two of them. There was the one on the other side.

Dunning: Pak Tank is over near Point San Pablo. You take the Point Molate exit.

M. Williams: Then there's Petromark in Point Richmond. But my husband said he has good reason to believe that the same guy owns both of them. He didn't want to come out and say it, but he said that he has reason to believe that.

The Richmond Waterfront

Industrial versus Recreational and Residential Uses

M. Williams: When they had that controversy about expanding, all the old-timers in Richmond came to bat for him, talking about, "We need the industry." and all that. That's the old-timers that have been living here. I guess you would call them blue collar workers.

Then the people that live out there, they said, "No." They said the man could expand somewhere else. He doesn't need that property. That property is too valuable to be tied up with industry, which it is. That's why I say that myself, I like what they have to say, because I think they're more for the people than they are just industry.

Of course, like you say, they've got it made. Most of them are probably well-to-do. But even so, somebody has to look out for the citizen, even if

M. Williams: it's going to take somebody that's a little bit more affluent, not concerned with their jobs.

But there's still plenty of room for jobs. That's what I'm saying. It's not like that's the last piece of property in Richmond where they can expand.

Dunning: That just happens to be such a beautiful spot down where Petromark wanted to expand, and plus it adjoins the Miller-Knox park.

M. Williams: Yes, right.

Dunning: It doesn't make a whole lot of sense.

M. Williams: Yes, because now that they don't use the ferries anymore at Ferry Point, Santa Fe was willing to sell that land to Richmond, and they could do whatever they wanted to with it. They could go ahead and add it to the park, or they could put up housing.

This guy wants it for more tanks. Why? You can walk right around the hill and they have all the beautiful homes just sitting on there. They have their own little beach, although you can't go down there. It comes with their property. But if they tied that land up with tanks, that would break that beachfront walk.

I'm not for it. I don't think that he needs all that. We fight about that all the time because my husband says that it would create more jobs. That's a lot of crap. I'm sorry.

Richmond's Image

Dunning: What do you think about the image of Richmond?

M. Williams: It's got a bad image. It's got a bad image because of one thing. Like I was just saying a few minutes ago, to me, people don't really care. All they care about--like the city council--is getting more industry. They don't care about the people per se. I don't know how to explain it, because it's like there's no one out there that really cares about how are the people doing.

As a result of that, they have a lot of these hoods, and these nuts down at the corner, people like that, just giving Richmond a bad name. They have so many people in Richmond that are really truly good citizens--all they want to do is work and have their houses. You never hear about them. I don't know how to explain that.

Dunning: You mostly hear about the drug problems, the violence, the rapes.

M. Williams: Yes. But you don't ever hear about the people that make it a nice community to live in. You go over in some neighborhoods on the South Side. People put a lot of money into their homes. And like you go over by the high school. But you hear about this bunch down here--the derelicts--out there taking over and creating problems.

I like Richmond myself. I've gone to Oakland quite a bit, and I know what it's like in Oakland, and I know what it's like in San Francisco. I wouldn't trade any of that for Richmond. I like the climate. It's not too hot, and it never gets too cold. I like Richmond, myself.

M. Williams: Like I say, I don't like some of the politics, because I think they're just a little bit too blue collarish. I don't know how to put that, but you know what I'm saying, that they're more concerned with industrializing Richmond than they are making it a nice place for the people to live.

The man that put that park in Point Richmond, I think that was one of the nicest things they could have done for Richmond. Everybody enjoys it. They get their money's worth.

Dunning: It's a very well-used park.

M. Williams: Oh, very much. People jog and everything. I'm glad for that. I think that was a good idea. At one time they wanted to sell Nicholl Park and put up housing. But they didn't do it. They held on to Nicholl Park, which is nice, right in the middle of town.

I've been on the buses, like tour buses. They had to come through Richmond to get us.

People said, "Oh. This is a nice town." They had never seen that part of Richmond.

The bus used to come right to downtown Richmond. It makes you feel proud, with the houses and everything, because it does have a nice appearance. When you're coming off the freeway you can see Richmond spread out.

Dunning: Most people wouldn't go out of their way to come to Richmond. What they see is Cutting, going down Cutting Boulevard to the Richmond-San Rafael Bridge.

M. Williams: Yes, right. They see the raw side.

Dunning: It seems like Richmond has a bad reputation, so people don't come in. They're afraid to come to Richmond.

M. Williams: I know. My brother wouldn't come here. He lives out in Oakland. I told him, I said, "You got a lot of nerve."

Well, he said that he's heard of people coming out here and getting killed. But that was a long time ago. They don't do that now. They have killings, but it's usually over that dope.

I think it's really true though. That always bothered me that Richmond didn't make more of an effort. I guess it's like they say, in sweeping dirt under the rug. But the first thing you do see when you come into Richmond is Cutting. You see Hoffman Boulevard.

It seems like they could have made a little more effort to clean up those areas. I hate to go that way. It's just so degrading. You see all those guys over there shucking and jiving all day long.

Dunning: At B&K Liquor and--

M. Williams: Yes. We don't need that. I'm surprised that the city hasn't closed it down. But like my husband said, he went up to the city hall, and he saw those new maps that they have. He said that when they get through with the freeway, all that activity is going to be gone. But by the same token, people are going to just be going right through Richmond on the freeway.

When they should have cleaned that up a little bit, they didn't. I saw one thing that was over on Cutting that I thought that somebody downtown

M. Williams: should have really taken hold of and expanded. People have a tendency to start little flea markets over there. You would see one guy would be selling roses, another one selling sunglasses.

Dunning: On that corner by Hoffman and Cutting Boulevard?

M. Williams: Yes. Coming into Richmond. That's why I say it seems like Richmond would have just taken one of those empty lots over there and paved it, and have the local people pay a small fee, and have like a little open-air flea market. That would have done away with that other image down the street.

You see people over there. They'll be selling tools and everything. One time women were selling quilts. The city could have taken advantage of that, but they didn't. They just act like they couldn't care less. That would have helped Richmond's image. A lot of people have money that come through there, going to Marin County. They might have gotten the habit of stopping and buying roses, or jewelry, or whatever they're selling. You've never seen that?

Dunning: All the time. They usually sell jeans, sunglasses, big pillows, usually a different thing every day.

M. Williams: Yes. Can't you see it would be nice if they had maybe like a little flea market?

Dunning: Yes.

M. Williams: They have the land over there. They're not doing anything with it. It doesn't belong to Richmond, it belongs to Caltrans, but they could have worked out some kind of a deal.

M. Williams: I like Richmond though as a place to live. I raised my kids here. I think I could have done a lot worse if I had raised them in Oakland or San Francisco, because in spite of the bad reputation, Richmond is kind of slower paced as far as kids are concerned than it is like in Oakland or San Francisco.

Dunning: What about your children? I know you have one daughter who is attending Hayward State. Are the other children in the area?

M. Williams: You would be surprised. I have one still here, they live over on South Side. My other daughter didn't stay. My son stays with us. He had a little trouble with his divorce. He moved back.

Dunning: He's here with you?

M. Williams: Yes. My daughter doesn't actually stay anymore though. She and one of her girlfriends, they tried it on their own. But she'll be coming back. She found she couldn't make it because she got out of college.

But they all like Richmond. I have one who moved to Portland, but she's thinking pretty strongly about coming back to Richmond. She's been up there now for about eight years. She said that she missed Richmond.

Dunning: Oh really? Did she marry and have a family up there?

M. Williams: She was married. She went up there with her second marriage, but it didn't last. They broke up. He moved back to Richmond, but she wants to come back. She's thinking pretty strong about moving back to Richmond.

M. Williams: They all looked favorably on Richmond in the fifties, the way it was. They said the same thing--you made friendships that last in those days. They all had their friends from high school days that they still communicate with. I don't think that you could do that so much in a place like Oakland where everything is so fast paced. I wouldn't want to bring a kid up in Oakland or San Francisco.

[Bell rings].

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Significant_Local_Figures

Former Mayor John Sheridan

Dunning: One of the things before we close, I'm wondering if there are any things about Richmond, either people or events, that you think should be remembered. Anything that really stands out in your mind?

M. Williams: What do you mean?

Dunning: Well, are there any important people to you in Richmond, or significant events that should be recorded?

M. Williams: You mean political?

Dunning: Well, in any way.

M. Williams: Even in '46, I never was active in politics. But I was always, I guess you could say, political.

M. Williams: But out of all the people in Richmond that made an impression on me, it was John Sheridan. He said something one time. This is like I was saying a few minutes ago. It seemed like one of the first things they wanted to do was to stop Richmond, just say, "Okay now. We had the war years. Now let's stop and go back to where we were."

I remember one thing he said then about that we had a chance to grow now with all the new people, and that he wanted to continue that. If I'm not mistaken, I hope not--but I think he's the one that pushed for the new civic center.

A lot of people said, "Well, we don't need it."

But he pushed for that. He pushed for so many things. I think he's the one that really wanted Richmond to go ahead with the port. He made a big impression on me when he was mayor. He really did.

Dunning: When was he mayor?

M. Williams: He had to have been mayor either in the late 1940s or the early fifties. I know it was around that time.

But it seemed like he was the only one that would say, "We have to keep growing. We can't go back to being the way it was."

I met him one time. We had to go up to the city hall for the P.T.A. and I met him. He came over and shook our hands. I met him again about two years ago at the port. My husband works for the port, and they had a dinner in Emeryville, and he was one of the honored guests. I had the chance to meet him again. I told him then how much I had always admired him.

M. Williams: He did a lot for Richmond. I think he did more for Richmond than almost anybody that I can remember. I know he did a lot during his administration to try to get Richmond out of the doldrums. He made more impression on me than anybody. John Sheridan.

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Dunning: You were just talking about John Sheridan, and you were hoping that he would run again.

M. Williams: But I think, like you said, that he's retired now. I think you're going to see a big impact from the new people that are moving in. I call them new people because they're bringing in influence. They have enough money to influence the city. I like that. I think we've needed something like that for a long time. That's about all I can remember.

Problem of Drugs in Richmond

M. Williams: I don't know how they could do it because it's not like they haven't been trying, but I'd like to see the police really and truly get this dope problem out of the way. I think that's done a lot to stagnate Richmond. A lot of people, now they're getting fearful more than ever. What can they do? They couldn't fight it in Oakland.

Dunning: When did you see the drug problem really become evident in Richmond?

M. Williams: That's funny, because we were talking about that. When my daughter lived here before, she was living down on Barrett, but it wasn't like it is now. It was nothing like it is now. In '84, that's when drugs really became a problem down here.

Dunning: Right here? You mean right on your corner?

M. Williams: No, no. This part of Richmond. They started down there on Sixth and Barrett. They got run off that corner, and then they came down here. Then they came off of Pennsylvania. They had them over on Pennsylvania real bad. They all migrated down here. That was in 1984 that we really noticed it real bad, enough to be really and truly concerned.

It's only been a little bit over a year, but in that year's time, we've seen so many shootings. People are afraid to drive by here, they might get shot.

Dunning: Have you actually seen shootings or heard them?

M. Williams: Oh, you hear them all the time, yes. And then you see them go by in their car and the windshields are all shot out. But the police have done so much. You can't say that they haven't tried. They've really tried.

I made a suggestion to them at the first of the year. In my opinion it would be the solution, but they said that they couldn't do it. I don't know why. I'm still going to write letters. I said all they needed to do was put up a little structure over here at the park, maybe just a little portable structure. The police could go in there and they could write their reports. Not be there all the time. I guess you could say it would be more or less like a little substation. They could go in there, write their reports, use the bathroom, maybe make a cup of coffee. Just be in and out, not be stationed there.

One cop told me, he said, "Well, they would burn it down."

M. Williams: I said, "No, because you have these structures now, they're made out of stainless steel, these construction trailers. There would be no way possible they could burn that down."

"Well, they would break out all the windows."

I said, "Not necessarily that they would break out the windows if they knew somebody would be coming there any minute." I said, "But the main thing, it would run away their customers. If the customers didn't know when a cop was going to show up, they wouldn't be down there buying that stuff. If they didn't have any customers, they couldn't operate."

I thought it was a good idea. I talked to one police officer, and he said they had been trying to get a house down here where they could use it for reconnaissance.

I said, "Well, if you had something like that, you wouldn't need any reconnaissance because there wouldn't be any customers."

They said that, "No." They didn't think it was feasible.

Dunning: Meanwhile there have been lots of break-ins in your neighborhood?

M. Williams: No. The ones that we have down here, they're not into using the stuff; they're selling it. What they do, they make enough money off of selling it, that actually, break-ins have gone down.

Dunning: When I spoke to you and Harry, you were talking about the fences, and that most of the people in this immediate neighborhood have been robbed.

M. Williams: That was before.

Dunning: Before '84?

M. Williams: Yes. That was before they started getting on the corner and selling it. A lot of these same kids that are selling dope now, at one time they were the ones that would be breaking into your house to get money to go buy that dope. That was a couple of years ago that everybody was getting robbed.

I was just saying that they were talking about how crime has gone down. That's because they're all down here selling it to each other and the people that have money to buy it. That's why crime has gone down, because they don't need to go in and be robbing people's houses, because they make enough money down here selling dope.

In a way, to me, this is worse. I'd rather see them actually rob people, because this is detrimental to the whole neighborhood, to the whole society. You might get a stray bullet when they're out there having their little shootouts.

You can't say that one is better than the other. Now don't misunderstand me. I don't like the robbing and I don't like the dope. I'm just saying that's why the crime rate has gone down, because they're down there selling that dope. Those kids make money down there. Some of them, they said, make like \$300 a day.

That's not as bad as it was, though, because the police are really keeping an eye on them. But at one time it got out of hand. It was just steady traffic coming in and stopping, trucks stopping, and people just backed up waiting to buy that dope.

M. Williams: The police finally moved in, and they've broken down their business. They've run off a lot of their customers.

Dunning: One thing I would like to ask you is, have you been active in any local organizations?

M. Williams: Yes, I was very active in the P.T.A. for a long time because I had so many kids coming up in school. I stayed with the P.T.A. up until not my baby, but the last girl, was through school over here. She got out in the sixties, because she graduated from high school in '66. So she got out of grammar school in the sixties. I was active all that time in the P.T.A.

Then, of course, I started working permanent, so I had to drop out. I started working permanent in 1959.

Dunning: With the post office?

M. Williams: The navy. Well, the post office, and then I went to the navy.

The Citizen's Action League

Monitor Pollution

M. Williams: The Citizen's Action League, they've been trying to get me to come to meetings and everything, but I don't know. I've talked to several of them, and they've come around. I was giving money for a while, and I was supposed to go with them to Sacramento, but I just never could get away from it. I liked what they're doing.

Dunning: Are they mostly people that live here in Richmond, or is it a conglomeration of people?

M. Williams: Most of the people that are active in there, they live in Richmond, but I think the ones that keep it going, a lot of them are from out of town, because one girl that came by, she's from Berkeley.

She came by a couple of times. She was very nice. She kind of lost faith in me, because I kept telling her I was going to come and I didn't.

But they do a lot. You asked me about the pollution. They've been trying to get the pollution cleaned up. They're more into environment. That was one thing that I had told her before, that I would like them to get more active in the neighborhoods themselves.

I know that's important, the pollution, but at the same time, I said, "You're really not going to make that much of an impact. You're not going to get Standard Oil to go out there and close off that drainage ditch, because Standard Oil is too big."

I'd like to see them get more playgrounds and parks for the kids, get the kids off the streets. She said that they're not into that. After they deal with all the pollution, then they would start thinking about the neighborhoods.

I really didn't get into it like I should have. I know that's a good cause, because they do have too many of the pollutions. What do they call it? Those dump sites?

Dunning: Toxic waste dumps.

M. Williams: Yes, toxic waste. But I just can't see them making this big corporation clean them up. All they do is make them pay a fine.

I was one of the ones--Bay Area Pollution Control had me call in all the time when Standard Oil would cut loose over there, so the guy gave me a number to call. He said I would be one of their watchers. There was myself and about a few people in Point Richmond, and then a lady in Atchison Village, and a couple that lives in North Richmond.

We were supposed to call in at the first sign of any kind of pollutants or odors in the air. They would come out and monitor it. But it got to the point that all they would do is drop a \$2500 fine on Standard Oil. That's nothing to them. They would drop it right off with income tax, so I just stopped calling in. You can't fight those people, all that money.

Health Hazards and Lung Diseases

Dunning: Do you think about the health hazards?

M. Williams: Yes.

Dunning: I've met a number of people that have lung problems from the area.

M. Williams: That's right. And they have a lot of older people living in Atchison Village. This man was telling me one time that I talked to him. He was very nice. He used to be with the Bay Area Pollution Control in San Francisco. He told me one time that that always bothered him, because he had met some of the people over there.

M. Williams: He said they're all older people. A lot of them are senior citizens. He said that the death rate in Atchison Village from things like emphysema, and pneumonia, and heart trouble was just staggering. He said he always believes it's because of the way that air flows from Chevron. It goes from North Richmond, and it goes on around like that, and it comes back over there. They get it twice.

Dunning: This is Atchison Village? Are they kind of like a little pocket?

M. Williams: Yes. He said it seems like they get it, because the air goes in a circle, so they get it twice over there. And the people in North Richmond would get it twice when it makes that flow. You can tell the way the fog comes in around here at night. The fog comes in here like that, and it makes a complete circle.

He said the death rate is staggering among the people over there. You know, they're all going to die because they're older people, but he said emphysema, pneumonia, anything to do with the lungs and heart, it seems like they have a high rate of that over there.

Dunning: What about asbestosis?

M. Williams: Well, a lot of people around here have it because they worked in the shipyard. My husband got checked out for that, because he worked in the shipyard. That's pretty high around here.

I think a lot of it has got to do with the chemicals that they let out over at Ortho. That's weed killer and all that. You know, Chevron, they make the Ortho. Once in a while, you would actually get nauseated.

M. Williams: Now they've got new burners that's supposed to take the sediment up higher in the air so you don't get it, but at one time you would get nauseated from that stuff. And that's weed killer. Have you ever smelled it?

Dunning: Yes. On foggy days you can really smell something in the air.

M. Williams: Yes.

Dunning: I think the real problem is when you don't smell it anymore. You get so used to it that you don't notice.

M. Williams: Yes, that's true. It's probably still out there, but then, like you say, they're taking away the odor. But it's still in the atmosphere. Yes, I read about that.

Of course, we're not any different than Oakland. I guess any time you live in an industrial community you pay the price.

Falling Out with the NAACP

Dunning: Were you ever active in the NAACP?

M. Williams: No. We had a falling out when I first moved here. So I've had nothing to do with them. I've talked to them sometimes, but we don't see eye to eye at all.

Dunning: You mean with the organization?

M. Williams: That's right. I had a falling out. You see, when I left Oakland, we had the "Y." I was always active in the YWCA. Then when I was teenager, we had a branch, a YWCA branch. Believe me, nobody ever thought about segregation. If I wanted to, I could have gone to the downtown Oakland branch any time I wanted to. We were content with the Linden Street branch. There was nothing about isolating ourselves. You would go over there and you could play badminton, volleyball. They had games and everything. The girls would go on trips.

When I got to this neighborhood, one of the first things I wanted to do was find out about the "Y." The "Y" at that time was where it's at now--on Macdonald Avenue--and it wasn't that easy to get back and forth, so I called them about information about starting a branch down here of the "Y." I said I would try to get the Oakland branch for funding so we could start a branch in my neighborhood.

I said, "They've got a lot of young black girls. They probably would be active in it, and they would be interested in that."

Dunning: You called the NAACP?

M. Williams: No. I called the "Y." I talked to the lady that I had known in Oakland, in my "Y." She told me that it would be best to call the headquarters and have them send me information, which I did. Then they told me to call the local "Y."

I told them that I was thinking about opening up a little branch, primarily for the young girls in this neighborhood that weren't going down there because it was strictly white, and they didn't feel comfortable. They had a lot of young girls around--not for myself, because I had, like I said,

M. Williams: three kids--but I thought about the young girls around here, and it's got such a good program for young girls.

I had a delegation from the NAACP tell me that I was trying to promote racism. I didn't see it like that.

I said, "Well, you have all these young girls around here. They don't have nothing to do. It would be a beautiful program for them."

"Well, they can go to the "Y" down there."

I said, "Well, they won't go because they say they don't feel comfortable."

"Well, then we have to fight the racism up there."

They told me I was doing a great wrong, so I just went in my hole, and that's it ever since. I don't look at it like that at all. Sometimes you can cover your nose to spite your face. Do you know what I'm saying? If you can begrudge yourself something like that because you don't want it to look like, for example, that it's a black "Y," which it wouldn't be, because there was so many Mexican girls and blacks. Everybody would have enjoyed it. But no.

I don't understand things like that. When we went to the "Y" at Oakland, we never thought about we were being discriminated against. We never thought about that. That's why I say that a lot of the NAACP policies, I'm not going to fault them, but a lot of them to me, in a way they're detrimental.

M. Williams: That's all I can say. That's my own personal opinion. If I'm being Uncle Tom, whatever, but to me they are. A lot of times they're so anxious to integrate that they forget harms that they might be doing.

I can see where a lot of times you have to have integration, but integration just for the sake of integration? I grew up out here, and it wasn't a problem. It's hard to explain it to you, because you're from back East, and you probably never had-- race was probably never a problem in Massachusetts either, was it?

Dunning: Well, it really was, particularly in Boston.

M. Williams: But you see--

Dunning: Probably the changes weren't as dramatic, certainly, as the Bay Area, where there was a huge influx because of World War II.

M. Williams: Now my husband was in Boston during the second world war, and he said everybody treated him right. And that was in the 1940s.

Dunning: He must have stayed in the right neighborhoods, because Boston is very provincial in terms of its neighborhoods. Sometimes you can't go from one neighborhood to the next.

M. Williams: But you see, that's what we're talking about. I know they have the same thing in Oakland when I lived in Oakland as a teenager, but it wasn't a problem. When did it become a problem?

Dunning: Maybe when people started thinking about it.

M. Williams: Okay. It's like, see now, just for an example, when we wanted to buy a house out here in Richmond. Like my husband was telling you, we ran into about three different houses that we really looked at, and then they had this thing about the restricted covenant. As small as Richmond was, it was so prejudiced. I'm going to be awfully frank with you. My husband got upset about it.

It didn't upset me, because I just said, "Money's money. If they don't want our money, to heck with it. We'll look for someplace else." That was always my attitude.

I don't ever want to go someplace where I'm not wanted. That's why when these people around here started acting funny like that, I got resentful. I was antagonistic--who are they to say where you can live or where you can't live. Now that part bothered me.

I don't know. I guess maybe I have the wrong attitude, because those people in the NAACP said I should be more striving to get things integrated that aren't integrated and not to be trying to get things segregated again. It wasn't that at all.

I've talked to people from back East, and they said the same thing, that there were a lot of places that they might not be able to go to, but they didn't want to go. It didn't really bother them.

That's why I guess I've never been active in the NAACP, though, because they see things that to me, they don't have any significance.

I could see why they wanted to integrate the schools, but I would want them to integrate the schools just so that the kids might not have to go

M. Williams: miles out of their way to go to school. I would want to see them integrate the schools so the kids could go to neighborhood schools per se, without having to, like you said, some of those little black kids would have to go miles out of the way because they couldn't go to the school because it was white. That doesn't make any sense to me.

But as far as just having them go to school with the white kids so they can say they go to a white school, I never did dig that at all. I went to school with white kids. Big deal. I guess where you grow up at determines the way you look at it.

Closing Remarks

Dunning: Do you have any other thoughts on Richmond that you think should be recorded?

M. Williams: Just what I said, that I want to see what the impact is going to be. I think it's going to be very exciting, because we already have two people in the city council, or three, that you could say that they (newcomers) put in. I think you're going to see a lot of difference in Richmond, I really do.

Dunning: For yourself, do you have any special ambitions now? Things you would like to do, or places you would like to go?

M. Williams: I'd like to move out of this neighborhood. I'd like to move up in the Hilltop area and get out of this neighborhood, because the neighborhood here is decaying. That's about all. You mean Richmond-wise?

Dunning: Or generally.

M. Williams: No, I'm just going to sit back now and watch the grass grow. [laughs].

Dunning: If, at a later time, anything comes to your mind that you think should be recorded, you can give me a buzz. I'll keep the tape. Most of these interviews are transcribed, so you'll get to read what you said.

M. Williams: What about the other ones? I'd like to see some of the other ones that you did, other people's.

Dunning: Well, I'm still at the collecting stage. Then they'll be transcribed. At the very end, there will be an exhibit, and then the transcripts will be in a library where you can read them, so they will be available.

M. Williams: So they will be? I'd like to see what some other people, what their thoughts were.

Dunning: It's real interesting, seeing Richmond from lots of different angles.

M. Williams: Yes, I really would like to see the others.

Dunning: One final thing: you had mentioned that you knew some other blacks that lived in Richmond before the war. I wondered if you would tell me their names or help me get in touch with them.

M. Williams: I can get their telephone numbers and call them. I have your number. And they can just call you?

Dunning: Yes.

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M. Williams: One woman grew up in the same neighborhood my husband grew up, and she would have pretty much the same perspective that he did.

Dunning: What was her name?

M. Williams: Now her name is Irene Woods. But I have to get her address and telephone number. I could get it from my sister-in-law. It would be nice if you would talk to her sometime soon, because she's going to be leaving. She's going to be moving down to Southern California.

Dunning: I'd like to get that quickly. Another name you mentioned was a "King"?

M. Williams: Ellison.

Dunning: "King" Ellison?

M. Williams: Yes.

Dunning: Do you think he's around?

M. Williams: Yes. I can get his number. I'll call my sister-in-law this afternoon and get those telephone numbers, and then I'll call you this evening. You'll be home this evening?

Dunning: Yes.

M. Williams: You should talk to them. Douglas Ellison because he used to be on the police force, and then "King" is his brother. But "King" is pretty old now. They could tell you so much. They were old-timers like my husband, but he sees things from a different perspective--my husband had a lot of contact with whites. The Ellisons were more [in] contact with black, so they give you a different perspective.

M. Williams: Irene now, she's pretty much like my husband and his sister. Most of their friends were more white because it was on this side of town, but the Ellisons and Isaac--You can always go talk to Isaac, because he's got that little Paper Shack. Isaac Petgrave.

Dunning: Actually, someone just mentioned his name last week to me. Isaac. Now who was he?

M. Williams: Petgrave. He owns this little place called the Paper Shack. It's right there on Eleventh and Ohio. It's a little business. He sells magazines and things like that. He's been living out here as long as my husband, if not longer. I think he was born and raised in Richmond, him and his sister. He could tell you a lot too. He's one of the old-timers. He's good to talk to.

Dunning: That sounds like a good jumping off point. Thank you very much.

M. Williams: I would like to see you talk to "King", because see, "King's" wife is named Anita, and she worked for years and years for the Department of Motor Vehicles, so she's very good about talking. She's very active in different things.

Dunning: Was she from Richmond herself?

M. Williams: I think in the beginning she was from Sacramento. But I meant she's kind of--how can I say that? She can talk.

Dunning: She's open?

M. Williams: Yes, she's very open, and like I said, she was very active in different things. If you tell her who you are, and then tell her that you're doing this project about early Richmond, and you went to talk

M. Williams: to the Ellisons, then I know she would probably take over. I'm going to get that telephone number.

Dunning: That would be great. Thank you very much.

M. Williams: I think you would enjoy talking to her, and then, like I say, Irene too, and then Isaac. You would get different views. And then the Graves, now that's another big family. They're back in North Richmond now. They're my husband's third or fourth cousin. They were very active in the shipyards. They were shipyard workers. I would have to get their telephone number.

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